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Tiffany Namkung April 9, 2024

Voice: The cinematic conveyance of documentarians' subjective intervention against modern Russian authoritarianism

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Abstract

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John Grierson, a pioneering scholar of documentary studies, famously described documentary films as the "creative treatment of actuality." The key word from Grierson's definition is *creative*, which implies that documentary films are not objective actuality itself. While documentaries have been long considered comparable to the expectations of journalism, portraying only the truth with no fabrications, discourses of documentary studies reveal that documentary filmmakers exert creativity and subjectivity in crafting their films. In this thesis, I take this overarching concept of documentarians' subjective intervention and expand it to the concept of the *voice* of documentary filmmakers. I borrow film scholar Bill Nichols' theoretical identifications of the meanings, functions, and types of voice in documentary filmmaking. Specifically, I seek to understand how documentary filmmakers achieve a distinct voice by cinematically conveying their personal viewpoints against modern Russian authoritarianism and Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. I analyze three documentary films that capture ordinary Russian and Ukrainian citizens' lives inside the Russia-Ukraine conflict: *Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom* (Evgeny Afineevsky, 2015), *What Have We Lost* (Marysia Nikitiuk, 2023), and *Putin's War at Home* (Gesbeen Mohammad, 2022). In each chapter, I outline the distinct conviction of each filmmaker, and through textual analyses of each film, I argue that voice in documentary filmmaking signifies *how* a documentary filmmaker delivers their socio-political conviction through the practice of filmmaking. Furthermore, I suggest that cinematic languages and methodologies are essential for understanding a documentary filmmaker's voice, and I identify several elements of these methodologies from each film that allow the filmmaker to achieve the intentions behind their unique voice as a documentarian.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking my adviser, Dr. Jing Wang, for her unconditional support and outstanding mentorship. If it weren't for her, I would not have discovered a passion for documentary films and this thesis would not exist today. Writing a thesis was certainly not easy but having Dr. Wang by my side has made it such an incredible and worthwhile experience. I cannot thank her enough for the countless number of hours she dedicated to this project and for her remarkable kindness.

I would also like to sincerely thank my committee members, Dr. Ju Hyun Park and Dr. Michele Schreiber, for contributing their valuable knowledge and time to this thesis. To Dr. Park, who I've known since freshman year, I thank her for her exceptional warmth throughout the past four years and I'm grateful to have shared my last project at Emory with her. To Dr. Schreiber, I thank her for being so accepting and encouraging since the early stages of this project, and I'm greatly appreciative of the insightful feedback she shared with me.

Furthermore, I must thank Dr. Tanine Allison for being the best honors coordinator I could ask for, and for always reminding me that my work matters. Her genuine passion for students' work is inspiring and I deeply thank her for giving me assurance and confidence when I had many doubts about myself.

I'm eternally grateful to my friends for their unwavering loyalty and support throughout this long process. I sincerely thank them for being so incredibly patient with me, even when I would go MIA and lock myself in the library for days on end, and for celebrating this milestone with me. I appreciate everyone for allowing me to share this journey and I could not have done this without them. Special thanks to Anya for quite literally saving my life.

Last but certainly not least, I most profoundly thank my family for believing in me more than I believe in myself. To my mom, it is your tremendous wisdom that has guided me here and thank you for gifting me the privilege to pursue my true passions. To my dad, I hope someday I can be as brilliant as you are and thank you for giving me the gift of education for the past 16 years. To my sister Sua, thank you for sending me funny pictures of yourself and the cats which never failed to brighten my days; I am in awe of your many talents. Big thanks to our cats, Bambi and Bean, for being overwhelmingly lovable and for sleeping on my laptop, giving me excuses to take a break from writing.

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Introduction

Surpassing two years since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the world continues to see the atrocities of this brutal war from afar through the media. From the beginning, the Russia-Ukraine war has been framed by the mass media as an abrupt and impulsive decision made by the dictator himself, President of Russia Vladimir Putin. Consequently, much of the global public's latest knowledge of the war, also fueled by headlines in journalism, is frequently reduced to the actions and decisions of powerful political leaders (primarily Putin, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and President of the United States Joe Biden). However, this tends to neglect the multiple layers of political history, oppression, and activism that everyday citizens of Russia and Ukraine live through as a consequence of modern Russian totalitarianism.

Nevertheless, such a phenomenon is understandable considering the necessity of extreme timeliness that journalism operates under. Delivering news about a volatile and unpredictable war as quickly as possible is difficult to carry out simultaneously with a careful examination of ordinary people's lives in war. This is where documentaries come in. Documentarians, unlike most journalists, have the liberty to choose specific topics, social issues, or people, and to explore these subjects extensively. Whereas journalism deals with a huge realm of topics to capture stories from, documentary films carry more niche qualities by paying closer attention to a particular corner of the world, often one that the rest of the world has never seen. Furthermore, documentarians can also choose their topics based on their own connections, convictions, or curiosities. Such personal attachments between a documentary filmmaker and their film lead to the primary topic of this thesis: the *voice* of documentary filmmakers.

In this thesis, I argue that documentary filmmakers carry a particular voice that conveys their specific viewpoint about parts of the "historical world" they seek to capture (Nichols 48). Voice, I suggest, is *how* a documentary filmmaker interacts with the historical world and delivers what they desire to say or do about it. Therefore, voice is distinct from the mere messages and implications of a documentary film and is rather a methodology of how those messages and implications are conveyed through the act of filmmaking. I articulate this argument by analyzing the work of three documentary filmmakers and how they construct a distinct voice through documenting Ukrainian and Russian citizens living through the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Before outlining the concept of voice, I want to first highlight that this thesis is foundationally built upon the argument that documentary films are not equivalent to 100% objective reality. Brian Winston concisely describes this confusion between documentary films and objective reality that has been prevalent among many documentary viewers: "Documentary is not fiction, but neither is journalism exactly, for all that it was widely perceived as being so at the end of the millennium" (182). Although documentary films can be best described as nonfictional, I argue that the nonfiction genre does not promise a verbatim replication of reality. There is no denying that documentary filmmakers are observers, but they are not passive observers. They speak through the images and stories they portray. Certain documentary scholars have also argued against the generalization that all documentary films carry objective truth, most famously explained by John Grierson who defined documentary films as the "creative treatment of actuality" (Nichols 5).

Through these argumentations and analyses, I seek to answer the following questions: How can "voice" be defined as a critical component of documentary filmmaking? Why is voice necessary for documentary filmmakers? What types of voice exist and what functions does each

type of voice have that allow documentarians to articulate their subjective convictions, specifically about Russia's authoritarian actions against Ukraine? What are the cinematic methodologies used by documentarians that help them achieve their desired voice? How and why are these cinematic languages appropriate for explaining the filmmaker's personal viewpoints about real political conflicts such as the modern Russian totalitarianism against Ukraine?

With this consideration, I turn to film scholar Bill Nichols and his book *Introduction to Documentary* for this thesis' main theoretical framework on the voice of documentary filmmakers. Nichols is one of the few scholars who extensively explores this topic. Nichols has a clear understanding of the authority of a documentarian, stating, "Everything we see and hear represents not only the historical world but also how the filmmaker wants to speak about that world" (48). Furthermore, Nichols articulates that "the voice of documentary makes claims, proposes perspectives, and evoke feelings … the voice of documentary is each film's specific way of expressing its way of seeing the world" (50). Nichols' perspective on documentarians' voices clearly grants the filmmaker great flexibility for subjective integration. Rather than holding documentary films accountable for objectivity, he acknowledges that a documentary film is made so that the filmmaker can exert their own views about the world we live in. Additionally, Nichols claims that voice is not simply what a documentarian is saying in their film, but how they express their subjectivity through the act of filmmaking. With such theoretical foundations from Nichols, throughout the thesis, I will spotlight the subjective and intentional qualities documentary films possess, rather than perceiving them simply as honest and untouched footage collected by a documentary filmmaker.

The bulk of developing each chapter incorporates textual analyses of the three films about the Russia-Ukraine conflict I choose to discuss in this thesis: *Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom* (Evgeny Afineevsky, 2015), *What Have We Lost* (Marysia Nikitiuk, 2023), and *Putin's War at Home* (Gesbeen Mohammad, 2022). In each chapter, I analyze voice by identifying cinematic elements in these films, coupled with the filmmakers' interviews and additional theoretical insight from various writers and film scholars. Furthermore, I find that through various utilization of voice and cinematic techniques, the filmmakers discussed in this thesis deliver their specific convictions that are against the actions and policies of Russia's authoritarian regime. Within the analyses, I examine how the documentary filmmakers build their points of view through formal elements, narrative formatting, and stylistic choices. This method allows me to answer my research questions with the concept of voice as a guiding framework, and to develop evidence on how the filmmakers' stance on life inside modern Russian totalitarianism is appropriately conveyed in the voice they exhibit through cinematic languages.

To clearly articulate the complexities of the theoretical concept of voice, I turn to several existing literature from film scholars. Aside from Nichols, another scholar I reference frequently is Carl Plantinga with his book *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*. Plantinga offers versatile discussions about the elements and forms of documentary films, including the filmmaker's voice. While Plantinga does not offer distinct categories of voice, he does offer a great range of arguments about the functions of the intentional choices a documentarian makes. Furthermore, Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro and their book *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning* provide additional insight into documentarians' roles in a socio-political sense and on stylistic choices documentarians communicate their arguments with. For the

analysis of narrative voice in chapter 3, specifically, I turn to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's theories of the narrative form from their book *Film Art: An Introduction*.

With these four primary scholars, including Nichols, I both apply their knowledge to my analysis in agreement with their theories and disagree with their arguments that contradict my observations about the filmmaker's voice in documentary films. I provide this balance between agreements and disagreements with existing literature not to evaluate each film scholar, but rather to contribute new perspectives and interpretations for documentary studies. In addition to these four primary scholars I reference, I turn to several other scholars whose literature is not explicitly centered around the voice of the documentary filmmaker, but nevertheless tangential to the theoretical articulation of my analysis.

Bill Nichols further identifies three forms of voice in documentary films: rhetorical voice, poetic voice, and narrative voice. The distinct characteristics and functions of each type of voice will lead the direction of my analyses of how each documentary film portrays the filmmakers' personal opinions about civilians' lived consequences throughout the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Each of the documentary films discussed in this thesis was purposely chosen based on their suitability and clear demonstrations of the types of voice identified by Nichols. While each type of voice will be discussed in length in the respective chapters, it is worth acknowledging here the different functions each voice carries and how the film I chose for each voice fits into the theoretical examination of each voice.

In Chapter 1, I will be analyzing the rhetorical voice of director Evgeny Afineevsky in his film *Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom*. For the sake of efficiency, this film will be referred to as *Winter on Fire* throughout the thesis. Evgeny Afineevsky is a Russian-born Jewish filmmaker now based in Los Angeles. As a filmmaker, Afineevsky has had quite a diverse

career, diving into both the fiction and non-fiction genres across multiple countries. He produced more than 30 musicals and directed an Israeli TV series called “Days of Love” in 1999. Afineevsky earned his first mainstream recognition as a documentarian through *Winter on Fire,* which was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary and the Emmy Award for Exceptional Merit in Documentary Filmmaking. The film was distributed by Netflix, which contributed as one of the production companies of the film. Rhetorical voice is characterized by its convincing and persuasive qualities, in which the filmmaker seeks to deliver a particular argument about a social phenomenon and convince the viewers to agree with that argument. *Winter on Fire* captures the Maidan Uprising, a historical 93-days-long civilian protest that protected Ukraine from the former pro-Russian and Putin-backed president, Viktor Yanukovych. In this chapter, I argue that Afineevsky’s rhetorical voice convinces the viewers that the Ukrainian citizens resiliently united against an unjustifiably oppressive pro-Russian government and that it is the citizens’ unity that represents how people are the power and people are the nation, not the government. I will analyze how Afineevsky’s invention of evidence through civilian characters, creation of memory through the omission of governmental authority figures, and contrastive editing style accentuate the persuasion behind his rhetorical voice. Importantly, this chapter focuses on how Afineevsky uses documentary filmmaking as a collection of evidence to support his arguments about the Maidan protests and the pro-Russian regime.

In Chapter 2, I will be analyzing the poetic voice of *What Have We Lost*, a short documentary film directed by Marysia Nikitiuk, who made this film in creative collaboration with Ukrainian children who have been affected by war. Marysia Nikitiuk is a Ukrainian filmmaker and writer who has written scripts since 2012 and started making her own films as a director in 2014. Her first feature film, *When the Trees Fall* (2018) premiered at the 68th Berlin

Film Festival and won the Panorama audience award. Beyond films, Nikitiuk ventures out to literature, having published multiple novels and poetry books. The poetic voice is the most cinematically stylistic and experimental out of the three voices. Nichols elaborates that in poetic voice, "issues of tempo and rhythm — often achieved through editing, music, and sound — have priority" over advancing an argument or telling a coherent story (56). Most famous for pioneering films such as Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), poetic documentaries break the conventional expectations of what a documentary film looks like and how it is made. Often, the poetic voice presents no distinct plot, which is also the case in *What Have We Lost*. Instead, what poetic voice does prioritize is installing a distinct perspective and ways of seeing the world. In this chapter, I investigate how Nikitiuk poetically portrays Ukrainian children's internal experiences of growing up in Russia's invasion and how they view the world of war, invasion, and political conflict. Extensively focusing on the experimental qualities of her poetic documentary filmmaking, I will examine how Nikitiuk utilizes abrupt editing, metaphorical cinematography, and sounds of symbolic meanings to poetically deliver Ukrainian children's internal perspectives of war.

In chapter 3, I will be exploring the narrative voice of *Putin's War at Home* (2022), a *FRONTLINE* documentary directed and produced by Gesbeen Mohammad. The film was co-produced by Vasiliy Kolotilov, who I argue, in this chapter, shares a narrative voice with Mohammad. Gesbeen Mohammad is a BAFTA and Emmy Award-winning journalist and documentarian who has worked across multiple channels including *FRONTLINE*, *BBC*, *Channel 4*, and *ITV*. Previously, she produced documentary films on international topics such as Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests, secrecy and oppression of the Chinese government, and the big oil industry. *Putin's War at Home* is Mohammad's only credited documentary film related to

Russia and Ukraine, which was nominated for a Peabody Award. Vasiliy Kolotilov is a Russian journalist who has written exposés on Putin's government for multiple American press organizations, including the *Los Angeles Times*. He also wrote for *The Moscow Times*, an independent news source in Russia. *Putin's War at Home* reveals that Kolotilov fled Russia in 2022 to avoid being drafted, but the location to which he fled was not disclosed. *Putin's War at Home* takes place inside Russia and captures the lives and stories of six Russian activists who openly oppose Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Narrative voice, as implied in its meaning, communicates through the stories it tells. Characterized by having a distinct beginning, middle, and end, the narrative voice is highlighted by the continuity of a central story throughout the film. In this chapter, I argue that Mohammad and Kolotilov build a narrative voice that reveals the brutal consequences of Putin's authoritarian regime through the act of storytelling. Specifically, I identify a bilayer structure of the film's narrative arc and how the two layers of the film are interconnected to convey continuity from beginning to end. I suggest that the participatory mode of filmmaking embedded in this bilayer structure further gives coherence and flow between the individual stories of different activists, establishing one connective central narrative about the harsh realities of being a vocal Russian anti-war activist under Putin's dictatorship.

Lastly, in the conclusion, I articulate a holistic organization of the implications of the voice of documentarians from my findings in the chapters. I reiterate my main arguments that drive the analytical lens of the thesis, specifically on the significance of highlighting documentarians' subjective intervention. Furthermore, I outline the processes of how I took the theoretical concept of the voice of documentary filmmakers and expanded it to cohesive textual analyses of three documentary films. Additionally, I address the contributions of the thesis to the

field of documentary studies and point out suggestions on how the voice of documentary filmmakers can be better studied and practiced. Lastly, I tie back the findings and discussions from my analyses to the value of understanding Russia's modern authoritarianism and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict through documentary films.

Chapter 1: Evidential persuasion of rhetorical voice in *Winter on Fire*

Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom captures 93 days of the Maidan Uprising at the heart of Kyiv from November 2013 through February 2014. Director Evgeny Afineevsky established a wider network of 28 local filmmakers, editors, and crew, both professionals and non-professionals, who all volunteered to document this critical moment in Ukrainian history and turn it into one coherent film. The film is primarily told through the perspectives of Ukrainian civilian protestors who have endured political oppression and violence from pro-Russian forces.

The Maidan Uprising, also known as Euromaidan, was a 93-day-long violent protest in Kyiv that lasted from November 21, 2013, to February 22, 2014. This revolution started as a peaceful youth-led protest when former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, who is pro-Russian, refused to sign with the European Union (EU) at the EU Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, in November 2013, despite making a promise to Ukrainians that his government would place Ukraine within the EU. After being elected as president in 2010, Yanukovych served as Putin's puppet more so than the president of Ukraine, repeatedly implementing multiple authoritarian policies and erasing parts of a democratic, West-leaning Ukraine.

When the news from Vilnius got to Kyiv, urbanites, and students of the city peacefully gathered around Kyiv's Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti) on November 21, 2013, to voice out against Yanukovych's decisions. There were no intentions or sight of violence during the early days of the protest until Yanukovych ordered the Ukrainian riot police to start physically attacking civilians in Maidan. What started as a peaceful civilian union for democracy quickly escalated into one of the most brutal winters in Ukraine. Violence dictated Kyiv for multiple months, but the civilians did not stop fighting for freedom. Eventually, Yanukovych

secretly fled the country and Ukrainians earned a democratic election for a new leader. Afineevsky captures this critical fight and victory of Ukrainian citizens in *Winter on Fire*.

Afineevsky claimed that his film "shows that unity can win": "Together, we can win battles. Respect can win battles. It's important to show that the government, at the end of the day, just [represents] people and people are the power" (Netflix Nederland & België). Based on these statements, in this chapter, I will analyze how Afineevsky's *rhetorical voice* outlines a strong stance that supports and commends Ukrainian citizens' civil unity and persistence during the Maidan Uprising. As a filmmaker who was actively a part of the Maidan protests, Afineevsky subjectively integrates himself into the unity of Ukrainians and ultimately convinces the viewers that Maidan is a victory of the Ukrainian people, the real people of power who bravely and righteously united to protect their country against a government that favored pro-Russian totalitarianism.

To expand on this analysis, I borrow Bill Nichols' theories on the *rhetorical voice*, which he explains is "an orator, or filmmaker, setting out to provide a perspective or offer a proposal regarding an aspect of the historical world" (55). Importantly, the rhetorical voice seeks to "inspire belief" and "instill conviction" about a specific viewpoint on a social issue (Nichols 56). Plantinga mirrors Nichols' sentiments, stating that the rhetoric of a documentary film "makes course to reasoning and persuasion to call for some course of action or to simply persuade the spectator about some issue" (105). As these scholars point out, the rhetorical voice's main purpose is instilling persuasion about a main argument and perspective the filmmaker seeks to make the audience agree with. Afineevsky's determination to bring the civilians' experiences at Maidan outside of Ukraine leads to his primary motive to provide evidence to the global

audience about the unwavering bravery and unity of Ukrainian citizens that allowed them to protect their Ukraine, not Yanukovych or Russia's Ukraine.

Nichols proposes five departments of rhetorical thinking in documentary films: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery (58). Out of these five departments, I will analyze how Afineevsky's rhetorical methodologies fit best into *invention, memory*, and *style*. Afineevsky achieves invention and memory through intentional inclusion and omission of character, and style through contrastive editing. Together, these methodologies allow Afineevsky to exclusively present a civilian-driven rhetoric of Ukraine's fight for freedom that convinces the audience to stand with the Ukrainians in their fight for a free independent nation of its own.

1.1 Invention: Inclusion of Ukrainian civilian characters

Without civilian subjects, there is no distinct rhetorical voice in *Winter on Fire.* This film is a highly perspective-driven documentary told through the words and actions of Ukrainian civilians. Afineevsky referred to his subjects as "characters," stating that he had civilian characters to his "right and left" in Maidan, who gave him the conviction to bring their experiences outside of Ukrainian borders (International Documentary Association). In this chapter, the term "character" will be used synonymously with the term "subjects," who are ultimately the Ukrainian citizens in *Winter on Fire* who share their experiences at the Maidan protests. Keeping this in mind, it is important to acknowledge *which* characters Afineevsky intentionally selected to include and exclude from the film and *why* he made these specific selections to achieve the rhetorical voice of his desires.

Plantinga argues that to understand a documentary film, we must analyze "what is selected and omitted" and that "we don't necessarily need to know the production history of a film to ask why certain subjects or topics were omitted and others included" (86). Watching *Winter on Fire*, it is not difficult to agree with Plantinga because Afineevsky is not subtle about including and excluding specific rhetorical characters. Afineevsky's selection of characters can distinctly be divided into the two following categories: the selection to include a diverse array of everyday civilians who came together in the fight for democracy, and the selection to exclude any person of governmental authority. The latter will be analyzed in association with the rhetorical department of *memory* in the next section. Essentially, Afineevsky heavily favors Ukrainian civilians as his primary subjects, using their perspectives as evidence for his argumentation that Ukrainian citizens powerfully united against the pro-Russian government's violent attempts to seize their democracy.

The intentional inclusion of civilian characters can be considered a strategy for the *invention* of the rhetorical voice. Nichols defines the invention of rhetorical voice as "the discovery of evidence, or 'proofs,' in support of a position or argument" (58). The evidence can be either "artistic" or "inartistic," and the kind of evidence we see in *Winter on Fire* is inartistic, as it pertains to documentative proof such as witnesses, photographs, and footage (Nichols 59). Therefore, what we see and hear from Afineevsky's civilian subjects are the inartistic evidentiary building blocks of the bigger element of rhetorical voice, that is invention. As Nichols notes, however, inartistic proof is beyond the filmmaker's rights to create from scratch. In other words, the filmmaker may gather and capture this evidence as it unfolds in front of them, but the filmmaker is not creatively generating the evidence themselves. Instead, the filmmaker has the "power to evaluate and interpret" inartistic proof to make a particular statement about the primary issue of the film (Nichols 59). This is especially true in films that deal with socio-political issues that have no scientific answers, like the Maidan protests and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, in which the filmmaker cannot dictate what happens politically, but they still have the authority to direct *how* the pieces of inartistic evidence provided by the subjects will be portrayed and *what* the evidence says about a controversial issue.

I suggest that the most prominent form of rhetorical invention and evidence in *Winter on Fire* is the first-hand accounts of the Maidan protests that Afineevsky's Ukrainian civilian subjects share in on-the-spot interviews. Afineevsky notably personalizes each of these individuals by captioning their name and occupation. The personalization of characters is one of Afineevsky's methodologies of rhetorical invention. He discovers these individuals who function as the core evidence of his main argument. Then, he showcases their identities in a way that concisely converses to the audience that there is a variety of Ukrainian civilians standing on the

grounds of Maidan, from doctors to art critic, singer, businessman, former soldiers, students, and even young children. Just by being introduced to the name and occupation of each civilian, the viewer can easily sense that most people in the protests are real, everyday people who are not in positions of political power. Such personalization establishes the foundational argumentation of Afineevsky's rhetorical voice by introducing us to the distinct civilian perspective that we *will* be following throughout the film, as well as the perspective we *should* follow and agree with. The only slight deviation from these "ordinary" subjects is various religious leaders in Kyiv who have come together to support Ukrainian citizens, a rare moment in history where different religions unite under the hopes of civil liberty. While these religious leaders do hold spiritual authority and are not *ordinary* per se, they nonetheless strengthen Afineevsky's rhetorical voice by highlighting a strong sense of unity that was so prominent among Ukrainians during Euromaidan, where even religious leaders became one with the civilians.

The identities of each interviewee further prove that before the revolution, there was little commonality among these protestors. These citizens were perhaps never meant to cross paths or create any form of unity together. They have come from different walks of life, and yet despite such differences, they are united under the desperate fight for freedom and democracy. Their motivations for the protest are also different — some are fighting for their own freedom, some for their children and Ukraine's future generations, others to stand in solidarity with their friends and peers. However, regardless of these differences, the civilian characters of *Winter on Fire* chose to stay and fight in Kyiv to protect their country, which is why they are able to contribute their lived experiences as evidence of the film's rhetorical invention. Through informing the audience with a simple yet powerful description of who each of these civilians is, Afineevsky convinces us that what brings together an unlikely group of people like Andrey Yanchenko (a

military reserve), Kamaliya Zahoor (a singer), and Roman Savelyev (12-year-old boy), is the urgency for freedom under threats of Russian totalitarianism.

Roman Savelyev is an example of this rhetorical invention, a "fascinating character" who was one of the youngest protestors in Maidan, who had never attended school before, and turned Maidan into "his school of life," according to Afineevsky (International Documentary Association). In one scene, Roman walks through the protestors' tents in Maidan and explains to the camera that he decided to volunteer in the tech tent, helping other protestors connect to phones and the internet. Afineevsky further explained that when he first met Roman, Roman was a "pure child," and at the end of the movement, there was a "drastic change" in him and his maturity, a symbolic testament to the personal transformations the Maidan Uprising has brought to those who participated (International Documentary Association).

Roman's character is a great example of how Afineevsky utilizes subjects to further prove the intensely transformative nature of the Maidan Uprising that forever changed the lives of many Ukrainians. Roman is necessary and symbolic evidence for conversing to the audience that many of those who fought at Maidan will never be the same people they were before Maidan. The transformation of maturity of this young boy is evidently shown in the film: he witnesses violence that no 12-year-old should be exposed to, he learns how to fight and stay resilient through the guidance of adult figures he has never met before, and he learns that freedom comes at a huge cost. Roman's transformation is not one of absolute heroism, but rather of the lasting effects of civil unrest as well as civil unity. It is rhetorically effective evidence that convinces the viewer that even aside from politics, the self-driven civilian efforts of the Maidan protests have brought changes in Ukrainian lives, most prominently shown by a 12-year-old boy who grew up too early from a fight he didn't start.

Of course, Roman is just one of many characters in *Winter on Fire* who provide testimonies about tremendous perseverance and unity among Ukrainian civilians amid the Maidan protests. For instance, Denis Serhiinko was part of the "AutoMaidan" activist group which carried out operations of the protests with their automobiles, such as transporting the injured to nearby hospitals. While heading to a hospital with a patient in his car, Serhiinko and other AutoMaidan activists were captured by the riot police who had no mercy for the sick and injured. Valerii Zalevskiy, a middle-aged heart surgeon, was unafraid to call out the government multiple times throughout his interview, claiming the government was "stealing [their] children's future," while also citing the heroic acts of his colleagues in the medical field who risked their lives and careers to voluntarily treat protestors from the frontlines. Maksim Panov and Ekaterina Averchenko, an attorney and a translator, respectively, shared how their friends initially organized a peaceful protest in Maidan on Facebook, which they joined without hesitance, completely unaware of what this peaceful gathering would soon escalate to. Later in the film, Averchenko emotionally recounts witnessing the deaths and morgues of her fellow civilian protestors.

These pieces of individual perspectives and experiences from civilian characters bring attention to the evidentiary functions of subjects and interviews that are unique to the rhetorical voice. While narrative voice will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, it is important to distinguish between characters and perspectives in rhetorical documentaries and those in narrative documentaries. Nichols succinctly describes that in rhetorical films, "Characters or social actors may come and go, offering information, giving testimony, providing evidence" (18). This is precisely what we observe from the civilian characters in *Winter on Fire*, in which each person is not a central character whose continuous story we follow in the film from start to

finish like we would watching a narrative film. Rather, characters of rhetorical voice serve as separate sources of information that appear only in certain parts of the film, and their main purpose is to provide evidence that supports the filmmaker's main argument. Similarly, in *Winter on Fire*, Afineevsky's characters provide testimony about the film's central assertion that commends Ukrainians' civil unity against the pro-Russian dictatorship in Maidan. Furthermore, the characters of rhetorical voice are also not connected within a continuous time and space. As viewers, we are not told precisely when and where Afineevsky's characters stood in front of the camera to share their points of view. However, such information is not necessary because the main purpose of their appearance in the film is to contribute to Afineevsky's central claim about the Maidan protests, not to build an understanding of a distinct setting like we would with storytelling.

This rhetorical practice of combining pieces of perspectives from subjects as evidence for the filmmaker's main argument can be further understood in conjunction with evidentiary editing of the expository mode. Modes refer to categories of stylistic frameworks for cinematic voice, and the expository mode "addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that tell a story, propose a perspective, or advance an argument" (Nichols 121). In other words, the maintenance of a specific argument in expository mode mirrors the prioritization of argumentation and persuasion in a rhetorical voice. Evidentiary editing, then, can be characterized as the act of "[sacrificing] spatial and temporal continuity to rope in images from far-flung places if they help advance the argument or support a proposal" (Nichols 123). Using evidentiary editing, the filmmaker's role is not to provide us with a coherence of time, space, and narrative structure among the characters from start to finish, but rather to move in between various times and spaces to emphasize the characters' evidential contributions for the film's rhetorical claims instead. The

interviews and insight from characters collaboratively serve as evidence edited together as the cinematic supporting material of the documentarian. This is a contrast from continuity editing prominent in narrative voice, which "[facilitates] the smooth flow of one image to another" and provides a sense of coherence in storytelling from the beginning to the end (Nichols 97). Continuity and coherence in the storytelling of the narrative voice will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

By intentionally choosing these civilian characters to dominate the film, Afineevsky effectively evaluates the rhetorically persuasive qualities these individuals hold which convinces the viewership that the Ukrainian citizens have been treated with injustice and tyranny by Yanukovych's government, but despite such dictatorial attempts, the citizens' bravery, sacrifice, and togetherness are what protected Ukraine as a nation. Furthermore, the avid practice of engaging civilians as collective evidence for his rhetorical claims allows Afineevsky to further express his solidarity with them, in which he does not have to explicitly say "I stand with the Ukrainian citizens in their fight for freedom." Afineevsky's attentiveness to rhetorical invention, specifically through the purposeful gathering of evidence from civilian subjects, establishes an honest and subjective point of view about the wrongdoings of Yanukovych and Putin's governments and his convictions about supporting the Ukrainian civilians.

1.2 Memory: Exclusion of authority figures

With such a vast range of Ukrainian civilian perspectives, we ought to question how Afineevsky conveys the people fighting these civilians. How does Afineevsky portray the people's opposition and what do they have to say, if they do get to speak at all? What evidence does he gather from this opposing side? As briefly mentioned in the previous section, Afineevsky notably excludes any interviews or conversations with government authorities, including politicians and the Ukrainian riot police. A stark contrast to the extensiveness of civilian involvement in *Winter on Fire*, authorities are unheard in this film. Furthermore, whereas Afineevsky's inclusion of civilians contributes to the department of evidentiary invention in rhetorical voice, his exclusion of authorities contributes to the department of *memory* in rhetorical voice.

Films, according to Nichols, "provide a tangible memory theater of its own" that presents an "external and visible representation of what was said and done" (67). It gives us a sense of how we remember events or people using connections between "what has already been shown" and "what is now being shown," and this exercise of building memory "can prove crucial to the construction of a coherent argument" (Nichols 67). The memories we build through watching a film can lead us to an understanding of a certain argumentation, which is why memory is pivotal to the rhetorical voice. Importantly, building memory does not require rhetorical speech, but can also be achieved through rhetorical acts, which Afineevsky takes advantage of through the exclusion of authorities as legitimate characters with points of view. After being shown extensive evidence of civilian-centered experiences in Maidan, the audience can combine such an extensive range with the absence of authorities' points of view and turn it into a solid memory of

the Maidan protests, which is that the people were truly the ones in power, and the government that failed to properly represent its people were essentially powerless and silent.

The term "exclusion" discussed in this section is not to be confused with a complete erasure of existence. In other words, as viewers, we are still able to *see* the authorities, mostly the Ukrainian riot police, the Berkut. The Berkut operate under the Ukrainian government and were ordered by Yanukovych to carry out violence against civilian protestors. On behalf of Yanukovych's government, the Berkut were the ones out in the streets of Kyiv directly facing and fighting the protestors. Despite how much we see the Berkut in this film, however, this is as close as we will get to learning about Ukrainian government authorities from watching *Winter on Fire*. There is no opportunity where, as audiences, we can personally connect with authorities and learn about their first-hand experiences at Maidan during the 93 days. We do not get to know any individual names of Berkut members nor hear their own words. In most scenes where the Berkut is present, they are portrayed as a collective mechanic unit, unlike Afineevsky's personalized and humanized portrayals of the civilian characters. Wearing their black helmets and uniforms, faces and bodies covered in armor, the Berkut stand in massive groups behind firm barricades facing the protestors. Like a scene from a *Star Wars* movie, where Darth Vader and his army start marching towards their enemy, the Berkut is predominantly visualized as voiceless agents of violence.

This essentially becomes our memory of Yanukovych's pro-Russian government from watching *Winter on Fire*. Their political opinions or motivations are nowhere to be found, and Afineevsky does not grant them the platform to speak up about the violence they are exhibiting toward civilian protestors. Government authorities certainly exist in the film, but it's difficult to say they are treated as legitimate subjects and characters like how Afineevsky treats Ukrainian

civilians. There are no counterarguments that center around pro-Russian ideologies in this film either and anyone who stands on Yanukovych's side is rendered silent. When our memories of the voicelessness of government authorities are coupled with the evidence of unity provided by civilian characters, Afineevsky's claims that people are the power and that only unity and respect can bring victory, become incredibly convincing.

Such intentional omission of one side of a sociopolitical issue, especially in comparison to his inclusion of the other side of the same issue, brings attention to the questions about the role and responsibility of a documentarian. Spence and Navarro point out that a documentarian's intentional character selection can bring out "unity and coherence of the documentary's perspective" (60). Indeed, this is what is observed from Afineevsky's selective inclusion and omission of characters in *Winter on Fire*. However, Spence and Navarro further state that "modern" and "contemporary" documentarians, on the other hand, often utilize a "more nuanced" and less authoritarian approach of perspective, in which they "acknowledge diverging points of view, refraining from making definitive statements, or letting it be known that what we are seeing and hearing are the personal views of the filmmaker" (60).

While Spence and Navarro aren't suggesting a chronological evolution of documentary filmmaking methods here, I disagree with their statement that a documentarian who acknowledges varying views is "more nuanced" than a documentarian who only acknowledges specific perspectives. If all documentarians approach their projects with the singular goal of objectivity and always choose to listen to all sides of a social issue, documentaries will be no less than a replication of conventional journalism. What distinguishes documentaries as a unique cinematic creation of nonfiction is that it does not have to be a comprehensive guide to socio-political matters. Although documentaries have epistemological elements, they are more personal

than journalistic works in that documentaries dive deeper into specificities of a social issue that matters to the filmmakers themselves, and from there we get to witness a distinct point of view and make specific memories that the filmmaker chooses to put out. Therefore, if Afineevsky deems intentional character selection as the most effective strategy for his rhetorical voice, it is difficult to claim that a more politically centrist approach would have benefitted him more.

On the topic of "coupling the personal and the social," Nichols writes, "subjectivity itself compels belief: instead of an aura of detached truthfulness, we have an honest admission of a partial but important, situated but impassioned perspective" (61). Nichols also criticizes that "far too many contemporary filmmakers appear to have lost their voice … they disavow the complexities of voice, and discourse, for the apparent simplicities of faithful observation or respectful representation" (19). These are incredibly important reminders for audiences who turn to documentaries with the expectations of flawless objectivity. I suggest that without personal conviction, a documentary filmmaker cannot fully establish trust and credibility for capturing a specific part of the historical world and conversing with the audience about it. Furthermore, part of exercising this conviction is giving platforms to the people whom the filmmaker deems are most deserving and socially significant. There is no right or wrong way of making a documentary, and the quality of a documentary is not solely defined by who and what a documentarian includes or omits. However, if we are to specifically look at the political context of *Winter on Fire* and Afineevsky's own words about the film's messages, his creations of rhetorical invention and memory based on subjective character selection are appropriate choices for the personal motivation that drove him to make the film in the first place.

1.3 Style: Editing for contradiction

While Bill Nichols provides a rich description of the functions and purposes of rhetorical voice, Nichols' theory presents its limitations in detailing stylistic elements that highlight Afineevsky's rhetorical voice. Nichols identifies style as one of the five departments of rhetorical voice which include elements such as camera angle, composition, depth of focus, editing, and more (66). However, Nichols' holistic examination of these stylistic elements is not extensive because he relies on his readers' existing knowledge of film style. Therefore, I bring in Spence and Navarro's exploration of editing for contrast and contradiction that can be applied to the cinematic style in *Winter on Fire*.

Spence and Navarro claim that this editing method captures juxtapositions between opposing sides of an issue in a film's sequence, but such portrayal "does not mean that both sides are received equally" (174). The authors go on to provide examples from films like *No End in Sight* (Charles Ferguson, 2007) and *Hearts and Minds* (Peter Davis, 1974), which, similar to *Winter on Fire*, depict conflicts between politicians and victims of war. These examples focus on the contrasting relationships between consecutive shots that allow the filmmaker to embody the disconnected gap between two sides of a political conflict and the irony and dilemma that stems from this disconnection. This methodology is also applicable to *Winter on Fire*'s contrasts between consecutive shots of the Berkut and the civilian protestors. Importantly, these contrasts are not there to merely separate the civilians and the Berkut one-dimensionally between the inherently good and the inherently bad, but rather to embody the morally ambiguous and ironic separation between the Berkut's Ukrainian identity and the protestors' Ukrainian identity. This editing strategy ultimately contributes to Afineevsky's rhetorical voice by adding an evidential

layer of Ukrainian citizens' efforts for unity, respect, and togetherness within the Ukrainian identity that the pro-Russian government failed to practice.

In a scene at Bankova Street near Maidan Square, protestors gather in response to the Berkut's physical violence towards women. Predominantly male protestors shout chants and prepare for potential physical hostility, setting up barricades and wearing protective gear. The Berkut carefully observes the protestors as their bodies perfectly align into a human barricade. In this atmosphere of extreme tension, there is a medium close-up shot of a male protestor shouting at the Berkut, "No aggression! Only peaceful protest!" His face is strongly visible, and it is clear he has no armor or weapons as he walks closer to the Berkut. We can see that his arms are open, rather than shielding the rest of his body. From this shot, there is a quick transition to another shot, a brief close-up of an unidentifiable Berkut police on the other side. In this frame, we can only see his eyes and nose, the rest of his face covered by his helmet, and another Berkut member in front of him. His eyes are wide open and move rapidly from side to side, signaling a sense of extreme anxiety. The movement of his eyes is the only movement we see from the young Berkut in this shot.

The back-to-back contrasts between the active and visible male protestor and the anonymous Berkut member effectively build tension and power dynamics. The close-up of the Berkut member offers evidence to the viewer that there are indeed people behind the helmets and uniforms, and that one of them is a young Ukrainian man who is anxious to be there. Perhaps he was not prepared for this level of tension, and perhaps he is morally conflicted when a fellow Ukrainian on the other side of the conflict offers peace rather than violence. Furthermore, this contrast brings out Afineevsky's claim that the people are the power, not the government. Those who were truly afraid during the Maidan protests can be considered the Berkut and the

government, not the civilians. The civilian protestors who came in peace and freedom are determined to fight with little fear or guilt, but the Berkut who were ordered to physically attack civilians, can be fearful like the young riot police in this scene.

In a similar scene, the camera follows an elderly Ukrainian man in religious garments walking in front of a line of Berkut in uniform with shields. The camera captures a close-up of the side of the man's face as he says to the Berkut, "I'm asking you one more time, I'm begging you, don't carry out the orders of convict Yanukovych." The man's elderly appearance with wrinkles and a gray beard is strongly visible, and the frown on his face delivers his sorrowful plea through the screen.

After this close-up shot, there is a shift to an over-the-shoulder shot with the elderly man's back on the left side of the shot and a medium close-up of another young Berkut member dominating the frame. This young Berkut stares at the elderly man with an ambiguous facial expression with no words or actions. His face is hard to read, and the light smile and direct stares at the elderly man bring in more ambiguity on what this riot police is thinking. Then, the scene shifts to a medium long shot of the Berkut's shields lined up, the audio of the elderly man's address to the Berkut still playing over the shot.

The last component of this sequence is a medium shot of another Berkut member who is also listening to the elderly man. Unlike the previous Berkut member in this scene who was staring directly at the elderly man with a light confusing smile, this Berkut member avoids eye contact with the man, briefly looking up and then quickly turning his eyes to the ground like a child being scolded. He is slightly facing down and there is no look of confidence or certainty from his posture and facial expression. Although it is hard to make a decisive judgment whether it is guilt that he is feeling, he certainly looks reluctant to exhibit the hostility of riot police. Like

the previous shots, the elderly man's desperate words play over the shot: "Come to the side of your nation!"

The contrastive relationship between these consecutive shots symbolically captures the physical and metaphorical barrier between an elderly man who is trying to lead the younger generation of Ukraine away from pro-Russian totalitarianism and the younger generation of riot police that remains on Yanukovych's side, whether they want to or not. The contrastive editing portrays a close and direct interaction between the opposing sides of this conflict, but there is no sense of solidarity or communication despite the elderly citizen's powerful reminder that the Berkut, too, are Ukrainians. Incorporating the elderly citizen's voice over the various shots of reactions from individual Berkut members effectively embodies the moral dilemma and irony of Ukrainians attacking other Ukrainians in a conflict initiated by Russia's authoritarian regime. The elderly man says, "Come to the side of *your* nation," not my nation. The Berkut can clearly hear his words, and they cannot refute that Ukraine is also their nation. They are all ordinary Ukrainian citizens at the end of the day, who speak the same language and stand on the same grounds of the city they all call home. Yet, they are standing in front of each other as enemies of a conflict instigated by the powerful individuals of Russia and Ukraine who do not care for an authentic Ukrainian nation. A sense of dilemma, reluctance, guilt, and disagreement are all captured in the contrasts of these edits.

Essentially, the contrastive editing style amplifies Afineevsky's rhetorical voice that provides a visual argumentation of how the Ukrainian civilian protestors cared for unity and peace over violence and further preserved the importance of an authentically independent Ukraine that Yanukovych's government failed to advocate for. Through the dynamics of these contrasting consecutive shots, the male protestor who called for peaceful protest and the elderly

citizen who still treated the Berkut as part of Ukraine are represented as evidence of the authenticity and bravery of Ukrainians. The contrasts between the two proactive men and the Berkut members facing them in silence embody Afineevsky's words that "people are the power" (Netflix Nederland & België). The citizens do not need weapons and armor to be powerful standing against the riot police. Within the complexities of moral ambiguity behind the Berkut's Ukrainian identity and the dilemma between Ukrainians of different political stances, Afineevsky preserves his clear rhetorical argument.

1.4 Conclusion

Jay Ruby's discussion on the question of objectivity in documentary films best describes Afineevsky's rhetorical approach to *Winter on Fire*: "Since politically committed image makers have definite points of view, often prior to the production of any images, they approach the content of the images, the people imaged, and their audiences with a fairly clear agenda" (217). In this chapter, I argued that Afineevsky's invention of evidence through civilian characters, development of memory through omission of figures of authority, and contrastive editing style contribute to building his distinct rhetorical voice that stands in solidarity with the Ukrainian civilians in the Maidan Uprising against the pro-Russian government's repressive brutality. Importantly, I suggested that the rhetorical strategies behind Afineevsky's cinematic pursuits in this film appropriately deliver evidence to the viewership that strengthens his personal viewpoint on the Maidan protests and pro-Russian authoritative governments.

It is no secret that Afineevsky's subjective interpretation was a pivotal process in making this film, and that makes his rhetorical voice even clearer. Although it has already been nearly a decade since the release of *Winter on Fire*, Afineevsky's documentation of the Maidan protests remains crucial in understanding the current affairs surrounding Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Putin's invasion in February 2022 came as a surprise to the rest of the world, but a closer look at Ukrainian history, including the Maidan protests, proves that Ukraine's fight against the Russian dictatorship has been a continuous challenge. Furthermore, Afineevsky's rhetorical documentary filmmaking not only proves that Ukraine's resilience against Russia, which we are witnessing today, is a continuation of their resilience from a decade ago, but also demonstrates that citizens' ability to unite and advocate for democracy is the driving force of preserving the power of the people.

Chapter 2: Stylistic installation of point of view of poetic voice in *What Have We Lost*

What Have We Lost is a short documentary directed by Ukrainian filmmaker Marysia Nikitiuk. This film was part of an art therapy program offered by the Voices of Children Foundation, a Ukrainian organization dedicated to providing humanitarian aid to children and families impacted by war. Several Ukrainian children from different regions participated in the film, and each of them got to express their experiences and trauma from war through writing and creating the film. Nine children are formally credited in the film for "script and actors." Describing this project, the Head of the Voices of Children Foundation board Olena Rozvadovska stated, "Art therapy gives children the opportunity to creatively reflect on their personal war experience. During the course, they learned to convey their experiences through stories by writing screenplays for movies. The children were in the space where everyone had the right to be themselves, did not hear criticism and could create. They transformed their traumatic experience into strength and psychological resilience" ("Teenagers of the Voices of Children foundation, together with the director Marysia Nikitiuk, created a short film 'What Have We Lost.'").

In this chapter, I argue that *What Have We Lost* carries a distinct *poetic voice* with the intention to convey the traumatic internal and psychological experiences of Ukrainian children in war that Rozvadovska refers to. Poetic voice, according to Nichols, "seldom advances an argument or tells a story primarily, though elements of both may be present" (56). Rather than epistemological or argumentative qualities, poetic documentaries prioritize tempo and rhythm, presenting highly stylistic elements that incorporate "aesthetic experimentation" and "[emphasize] not the dissemination of factual information, but the sensual and formal qualities of their subjects" (Spence and Navarro 147, Plantinga 173). As such, poetic voice is recognized for its emphasis on formal qualities that bring out patterns, motifs, and appeal to the senses. This is

quite a distinction from the discourses of argumentation discussed in the previous chapter about the rhetorical voice.

Furthermore, I suggest that the purpose behind such experimental and formal qualities of the poetic voice is to install a distinct perspective of perceiving, feeling, and reacting to the world around us. Relatedly, in this chapter, I will specifically analyze how Nitikiuk's poetic voice portrays the complex internal realities of living through Russia's invasion and authoritarian regime as a Ukrainian child. Nichols points out that the poetic voice "gives a sense of how the world looks and feels when seen from a distinct perspective that values formal qualities" and this is precisely how Nikitiuk incorporates Ukrainian children's perspectives on the war with poetic documentary filmmaking (56). The two other two films discussed in this thesis, like most documentaries about war and politics, focus on the external realities and consequences of political crises. These films are focused on combining footage and contexts that explain various trajectories of political conflict. *What Have We Lost*, however, has no distinct storyline nor does it attempt to deliver knowledge or claims about the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Instead, the film symbolically utilizes sensual aesthetics to embody the complex emotional experiences and internal realities of growing up in war, and how Ukrainian children see the world of war and conflict. In this chapter, I will be analyzing how Nikitiuk achieves such a distinct poetic voice through abrupt editing, cinematography of children immersed in nature, and sounds of music with symbolic meanings created by politically vocal Ukrainian musicians.

Because of the highly stylistic nature, I find that documentary films and filmmakers with poetic voices are difficult to find, particularly in the context of war and political conflict. Poetic voice speaks through "moods," "tone," and motifs which I argue pose challenges for fully conveying the complexity and seriousness of topics like war and politics (Nichols 116). Facts,

claims, and stories about a political conflict come from external sources that can be discovered and referenced, but the psychological and atmospheric depths of a political conflict cannot simply be discovered. Rather, they must be carefully surveyed in a cinematic manner. Furthermore, poetic representation follows with ethical concerns about romanticizing war and human sacrifice with aesthetic visuals, which heightens the difficulty of utilizing poetic voice to make a documentary film about an ongoing war. Despite these implications, however, Nikitiuk cleverly finds an appropriate intersection between poetic documentary filmmaking and the current war in Ukraine: children.

2.1 Abrupt Editing: Interruption and lack of logical flow

I have briefly discussed in the previous chapter that continuity editing of narrative voice establishes logical connections between segments and scenes in the film, telling a cohesive story from the film's start to finish. Narrative films put together pieces of scenes according to the orders of causes and effects, organizing the film into a singular story. Poetic documentaries like *What Have We Lost*, however, can pursue a different type of editing because poetic voice prioritizes stylistically installing a distinct point of view over telling a cohesive story or asserting central claims. In this film, Nikitiuk utilizes the techniques of abrupt editing that removes narrative and logical connections between scenes, dismantling a distinct plot. Furthermore, unlike evidentiary editing of rhetorical voice, the abrupt editing in *What Have We Lost* does not group together specific segments or characters of the film to prove the main argument of the filmmaker. This abrupt editing style mirrors Nichols' descriptions of poetic documentary filmmaking, in which he emphasizes that poetic films "sacrifice the connections of continuity editing and the sense of a specific location in time and place that follows from such editing…the filmmaker's engagement is with film form as much as, or more than, with social actors" (116). Spence and Navarro reiterate this point, stating, "the relationship between one segment and others is established less by a sense of narrative development than by the repetition of motifs" (148).

The edited organization of scenes in *What Have We Lost* is almost dream-like, in which we don't get a comprehensive development of a story. The film jumps from one scene to another and it's hard to describe what happens in the film sequentially, much like trying to describe a dream from start to finish. This abrupt editing style serves as an appropriate representation of how, much like the logical flow of this film, Ukrainian children's lives have also been

interrupted by Russia's invasion and that the war has cut the natural trajectories of a normal childhood from their lives.

What Have We Lost begins with several children gathering on a field in front of a destroyed building, each minding their activities such as planting a tree, playing the guitar, gazing into the camera, and blanking out into space. The narration of each child reflecting on what they have lost plays over the visuals. Some say they've lost peace, others say inner space, family and friends, and childhood. There is no distinct storyline shown in this opening scene. Rather, the children merely exist in the field, trying to fill in the internal and external void of themselves and their surroundings through different activities. There is action and there is a dialogue in this sequence, but Nikitiuk provides us with no inciting incident. For an audience expecting answers and clarity, this opening scene rather leaves us with the question of how the next scenes will allow us to discover a clearer story.

However, this film is a poetic documentary. Instead of giving us a connective flow to a new scene, the film abruptly cuts to a low-angle shot of a forest, the camera walking through the forest and pointing up at the sky covered by enormous trees. Rhythmic music coupled with sounds of heavy breathing and insects buzzing engage the atmosphere. Then, we see extreme close-ups of a girl's skin and clothing buried in a mound of leaves, flowers, and soil, as if the plants are growing out of her. We start hearing a whispered voiceover, presumably the voice of this mysterious girl: "I'll cling to the ground with my hands and feet. I'll put down roots. I'll sprout. I'll let the moss become my skin." We see extreme close-ups of her face as well, but there is no information about who she is or what her personal narrative is. She just recites this monologue that reads like a poem rather than a dialogue. This mysterious girl appears to be in complete solitude and perhaps seeking refuge in the forest. The camera shortly pans back to the

low-angle shot of the trees, and we are left with even more curiosity about who this girl is and what she is doing in the forest. However, before we find any answers, the film abruptly cuts to a new scene.

A close-up shot of another girl whose body is buried completely in wood bark and soil starts the new scene, with only a quarter of her face visible. As the hands of unknown people (later revealed as the other children) start removing the wood and soil from her face, her voiceover simultaneously reveals that this girl is a 16-year-old named Sofia, and she's been living in political unrest since she was seven years old: "I was in the 2nd grade when people in uniform with machine guns appeared near my school. I finished the 11th grade, and they are still there. The war has been going on for nine years. It was always a war. It's still a war." The camera pans away from Sofia and the hands as her upper body becomes free from the wood and soil. Sofia just lays still, not moving an inch.

As we are observing Sofia, there is yet another cut to a new scene of a girl in a jersey kicking a ball alone on a grass field. Her narration reveals that she is from Kramatorsk (a city located in eastern Ukraine that has been attacked since the Donbas war in 2014). She says she has been in solitude for nine years and that she looks at old photos to reminisce about the joy of being with friends before the loneliness of war struck her. The camera follows the girl's footsteps and movements kicking the ball through the field, with the emptiness of a picturesque valley captured in the background. She continues to play with the ball, trying to balance it on her forehead. From a low angle, the camera places the girl's upper body and the ball toward the sky, as a beam of sunlight reflects on her face. Juxtaposing the darkness and loneliness of war described in her narration, the girl is smiling and playing with the ball under the bright sky.

Besides the opening and ending sequences where all the children who participated in the film are together on the field in front of the destroyed building, the film abruptly cuts back and forth between these three main scenes: a mysterious girl buried in the forest, Sofia who is being taken out of a pile of woods by others, and a girl from Kramatorsk who plays with a ball alone in a field. Each scene has a subject and a dialogue, as well as action, but there is no inciting incident that drives a continuous narrative. In the scenes that follow, the girl in the forest brushes off the plants and dirt she was buried in and walks away through the forest wearing a flower crown; Sofia is freed from the pile of wood by her friends and they build a safe "house" using tree branches and their arms; the girl from Kramatorsk continues playing with her ball alone, expressing her fear that once the filming is over, she will be alone again. That is the extent of how much we learn about these children.

Between these three scenes, instead of connections between inciting incidents that follow a story, there is a common theme of visually embodying children's emotional experiences with war that intercept one another: fear, solitude, loneliness, desire for refuge, and detachment from a normal reality. These emotions come and go unexpectedly through intermittent editing, as the interruption of logical flow that the audience experiences while watching this film essentially represents how children's traumatic emotional turmoil at war is jarring and unstable. The lack of logical flow between the scenes carries a symbolic value of presenting us with the distinct perspective of Ukrainian children who are forced to face the world through a series of interruptions and hindrances by war and authoritarianism during childhood. War disrupts childhood and growth in normalcy, and Nikitiuk effectively delivers a visualization of the inner realities of children in war through poetically incorporating abrupt and intermittent editing.

Discussing the process of working with children for *What Have We Lost*, Nikitiuk stated, "During these 3 months of the course, we talked a lot about our reality, personal stories. All this causes a lot of emotions, and you don't always understand what to do with them" ("Teenagers of the Voices of Children foundation, together with the director Marysia Nikitiuk, created a short film 'What Have We Lost.'"). It is clear that throughout the production, Nikitiuk had a profound understanding of the importance of holding open conversations about the emotional and personal impacts of war that the children carry inside of them. Watching the film, it is not surprising that these discussions could allow Nikitiuk and the children to build a cinematic recognition of how the inner child feels and sees the world of war and what it is from this perspective that they can show the rest of the world through filmmaking. I find that this process during the production has brought out the uniqueness of the film's poetic style of editing and Nikitiuk's reluctance to rely on a linear story. She recognized the complexity and turbulence in the way Ukrainian children's views of the world have shifted since Russia's attacks, and she delivered such complexity and turbulence abruptness to the world of the film.

Spence and Navarro claim that documentarians can choose to pursue the poetic form "as a tool to explore personal concerns or aspects of life we often take for granted" (147). They further point out that "the more unconventional that arrangement appears, the greater the potential to look at the world from a fresh perspective" (147). I strongly resonate with Spence and Navarro's proposal that the poetic voice presents opportunities for documentarians to convey new ways of seeing the world that we may have overlooked, and I also find their explanation to be suitable for what Nikitiuk is achieving with her editing style in *What Have We Lost*. Ultimately, *What Have We Lost* is a formal cinematic examination of living through and seeing Russia's invasion firsthand as a Ukrainian child. Conveying this world of authoritarianism,

conflict, and war by visually representing the inner realities of children is a “fresh” presentation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict because most documentary films are rather concerned with generating argument, drama, and information about the externals of this political conflict. The innocence of childhood and youth is greatly taken for granted within this immense focus on conflict and drama of politics, but for Ukrainian children, childhood is a long period of volatility and vulnerability captured in the traumatic interruptions and invasions of war the adults started.

2.2 Cinematography: Metaphor of children immersed in nature

The previous section's descriptions of scenes make several references to elements of nature like forest, trees, flowers, grass, and sunlight. Specifically, the film poetically brings in nature through physical integration with the children. Throughout the film, nature is present in every scene and the children coexist with nature. The natural setting makes it difficult to identify where exactly the children are, which heightens the implication that they are in isolation, away from civilization. The film's heavy emphasis on nature is not surprising when we consider Nikitiuk's claims about her film: "For me, this film is about the fact that the war destroys, Russia destroys our world, environment, life in the end" ("Teenagers of the Voices of Children foundation, together with the director Marysia Nikitiuk, created a short film 'What Have We Lost.'"). This comment stands out as Nikitiuk's specific focus on the war's most vulnerable victims. That is, when war erupts, children become a singular entity with nature in vulnerability. Both are endangered against complete destruction, yet ironically, both seek refuge in one another because only they can protect themselves in war. Importantly, Nikitiuk exhibits this associative view between human life and the environment as part of her poetic voice through cinematography that depicts distinct visualization of children hiding in nature and physically becoming one with nature. This integration serves as a motif that metaphorically symbolizes children's experiences with war's destruction of themselves and their environment.

The most prominent example of this cinematography is the visualization of the mysterious girl in the forest. When we are first introduced to this girl, the camera observes her from multiple angles. First, the camera frames extreme close-ups of her hands and feet in the soil which appear as if they are growing from the ground. Continuing the frame, the camera pans through unidentifiable parts of her clothing and body with flowers, moss, and mushrooms on

them. Then, there is a medium long shot from behind the girl's head, in which we see her lying under a tree. Although she is opening her eyes, the girl is inanimate and still, much like the nature around her. The colors in the shots are bright and prominent. Her green eyes carry a glimpse of yellow reflected by the sunlight; the flowers are white, pink, and purple; the leaves and mosses have remarkably vibrant shades of green; her skirt has various shades of bright orange and red mixed together.

Within such physical integration between the girl and the nature around her, and the dynamics of color between the girl and nature, there is a visual rhythm of organic vibrancy but also a sense of fragility. Both nature and the girl lay colorful and still out in the open forest of isolation with no layers of protection. There is peace and a sense of organic purity, but there is also suspense. These moods and ambiance delivered through cinematography incarnate the delicacy of a child's purity and innocence, as well as the defenseless state of nature that is so easy for civilization and war to invade and destroy. Even without an invasive force on screen, the aesthetic visuals of patterns and colors convey a sense of vulnerability and tension.

The cinematography surrounding Sofia is another primary example of metaphorical visual integration between children and nature. Sofia's first appearance in the film is a medium close-up shot of a portion of her face, with the rest of the frame entirely occupied by branches of wood. A contrast to the cinematography of the mysterious girl, there is little variety of color. Rather, Sofia's face blends in with the light-shaded tree branches, as if she is camouflaged, and there is little notion of the vibrancy of life. Whereas the girl in the forest was exposed to the surface with her body as part of nature, Sofia hides behind the barriers of nature as she blends in with the woods. In the scene, a fly lands on her face, but her arms are buried deep in the soil, and she cannot get rid of the fly.

As the hands of other children start removing the wood and chunks of soil from Sofia, the visual contrasts between the human body and the environment become more apparent. The camouflaged mixture between Sofia's face and the wood is eliminated piece by piece. Ironically, the more the children dig, the more we gain a true dimensional sense of how deeply Sofia was buried. Whereas in the first shot, we only saw wood covering her face, once that layer is removed, it is revealed that her entire body, excluding her face, is completely buried under the ground. Sofia is so deeply shielded by nature, but she is still vulnerable and unsafe because if she is not taken out by her friends, she is immobile and cannot escape. Nikitiuk once again achieves a visual metaphor of children's experiences of hiding and seeking refuge in the underground, away from war. She further conveys the sense of sensitivity and dependency among children and nature through the formal use of visual metaphors in cinematography.

Within such a metaphorical portrayal of vulnerability, however, there is also a reference to growth and hope. When Sofia reappears in the film after being freed from the burial, her body is now completely taken out from the ground. As she sits on the mound of wood she was buried in, several children start gathering around her and building a "house" around Sofia, with branches of wood and their arms. Simultaneously, Sofia narrates, "I want to build a house that won't be taken by people with guns." While the children are building the house, the camera places Sofia's back in the center of the frame in a medium close-up shot, then pans up to the children's hands and zooms into a close-up shot of the roof. The paleness of their skin contrasts the green leaves in the background. Then, there is a long shot with the children and their house in the center, with the scenery of the forest as a backdrop that surrounds the children. Here in the forest, the children don't have an actual home and they are still isolated far away from civilization, but they are no longer hiding nor are they camouflaged. Nature surrounds them with

life, and though they still carry vulnerability, the children find a sense of comfort, companionship, and safety in being together in nature.

It is worth clarifying that this poetic cinematography should not be confused with the objectification of children. Nichols points out that people serve a unique function in poetic documentaries: “People more typically function on a par with other objects as raw material that filmmakers select and arrange into association and patterns of their choosing” (116). Nichols’ description highlights how the poetic voice treats people as patterns and motifs more so than complex beings with intricate arguments and views on society. Plantinga makes a similar note, in which he states, “The poetic film represents its subject as an aesthetic object” (173).

I find that Nikitiuk’s cinematography of blending the children and nature mirrors most of Nichols and Plantinga’s explanations. Nikitiuk clearly prioritizes visuals and patterns of association between children and nature. It is undeniable that there is very little factual knowledge, rhetorical argumentation, or epistemological function that comes out of the children’s presence in this film. Steering away from emphasizing children’s individual humanized identities, the cinematography embodies children more as metaphors for their experiences with war than as intellectual beings. However, I suggest that the term “object” is not applicable to the function of Ukrainian children in the metaphorical cinematography of *What Have We Lost*. Instead, I argue that they function as an extension of life on Earth in a world filled with war and invasion. As the extension of life, the children embody the complex web of internal perceptions of war and conflict: vulnerability, fragility, disguise, escape, and glimpses of hope. Therefore, while it is true that Nikitiuk places children “on par” with the raw and organic matters of nature, she certainly does not resort to treating them merely as objects of aesthetics because that would mean she is taking life away from her depiction of children, not adding more life to

their symbolic value. Within the analysis of a documentary filmmaker's poetic voice, the evaluation of whether the filmmaker uses their subjects as mere objects or as embodiments of an idea or motif should not be solely determined based on the visualization of subjects, but by the meanings behind such visualization.

2.3 Sound: Music of the Ukrainian identity

Much like the editing and cinematography of the film, the sound of *What Have We Lost* also conveys poetic and artistic expressions of Ukrainian children's perspectives on authoritarian invasion and war. Specifically, the artists behind the film's music add in-depth implications of Ukrainian identity in art. Nikitiuk utilizes two songs in the film: "Human" by Dakh Daughters and "Children" by Zhadan and Dogs (Zhadan i Sobaky). Dakh Daughters and Zhadan and Dogs are both Ukrainian bands whose work center around creatively voicing out Ukraine's distinct entity as an individual country and condemning violence and war. In this section, I will discuss how the music of these two bands, as well as their artist-activist backgrounds, contribute to Nikitiuk's poetic voice that puts Ukrainian children at the center of the way we perceive Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Dakh Daughters is a Ukrainian band composed of seven female artists. They are a part of "DAKH," a center for contemporary art located in Kyiv since 1994. Dakh Daughters' artistic work can be best described as a combination of theater and music, between cabaret and punk, with experimental and apocalyptic performances dominating their creativity. Dakh Daughters is most notable for their utilization of art to voice out the legitimacy and struggles of preserving the Ukrainian identity. They incorporate styles of Ukrainian folk music into their songs and lyrically question the sufferings in war, emphasizing the fight for the authentic independence of Ukraine. Dakh Daughters became most famous during the Maidan protests in 2014, where they held multiple performances to urge a sense of Ukrainian perseverance and support fellow civilians in their fight for Ukraine's freedom. Dakh Daughters' songs such as "Rozy/Donbass," "Euromaidan," and "Human" achieve a particular form of artistic activism that Marie Le Bec

describes in *L'intermede*: "Dakh Daughters manage to develop a poetry of anger to the rhythm of war drums, the sobs of violins and the frenzied hope of 'Ukraine on Fire.'"

"Human" by Dakh Daughters is predominantly incorporated as background tempo in the scenes of *What Have We Lost* where the mysterious girl is immersed in the forest. The repetitive and rhythmic beats of the instrumentals of the melody coupled with the breathing sounds and audio from nature combine into one coherent sound of the tempo of life in the isolated forest. Such demonstration of sound achieves the rhythm of suspense and tension, building an atmosphere of isolation, stillness, and a sense of fear. Played over the images of solitude and stillness of a girl alone in nature, the temporal rhythm of the music serves as an additional appeal to the senses, in which the audience can not only see the complexities of the internal complexity between fear and refuge but also hear how this internal complexity can be represented as sound.

Interestingly, Nikitiuk doesn't simply utilize the entirety of "Human" throughout the film. Instead, she selects specific parts of the song. The first part is the sound of tempo that contains no lyrics, which was discussed in the previous paragraph. The second part is the repeated melody of the song that goes, "Why is there so much evil in this world?" (Dakh Daughters). This simple yet powerful phrase appropriately embodies the questions a child can ask when they experience and witness war and invasion. Children's way of looking at war is not prioritizing the logical understanding of political and historical dimensions, but rather seeking to answer the fundamental question of why such evil, violence, and hatred exist in the world we live in. Incorporating "Human" as the sound of the film, Nikitiuk portrays a clear representation of Ukrainian children's introspective reflections on Russia's invasion, a different perspective of looking at the war from the adults who are too familiar with conflict and hatred. Simultaneously, Nikitiuk preserves the authenticity of the Ukrainian language and folk music as the sound of the

film, symbolically conveying the emphasis on a distinct Ukrainian identity. Rather than trying to explain Ukrainian children's viewpoints on Russia's invasion of Ukraine through words and information, Nikitiuk cleverly utilizes a song by Ukrainian artists who, like herself, also artistically pursue the advocacy of a liberated Ukraine. Dakh Daughters' "Human" both aurally portrays the inner tension of Ukrainian children growing up in war and symbolically communicates children's questions about why the atrocities of humans invading and destroying other humans are ever-present.

Another musical group selected by Nikitiuk, Zhadan and Dogs, is a six-member band created in 2000, led by singer and poet Serhiy Zhadan. Zhadan is a familiar name to many Ukrainians for his vocal activism against pro-Russian ideology, according to journalist Amanda Coakley who had an interview with Zhadan in June 2022 for *Time Magazine*. He served as a prominent activist and leader against Russia's political corruption in several historical movements, including the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Maidan protests. After the war broke out, Zhadan and his band members have "rolled up their sleeves to help with volunteer efforts and perform concerts to people sheltering from Russian bombs in Kharkiv's metro," according to Coakley.

What is notable about Zhadan that fits most appropriately to the political activism behind Nikitiuk's poetic and artistic endeavors in *What Have We Lost* is that Zhadan is also a poet who uses art and poetry to preserve the authenticity of Ukrainian identity while condemning Russia's attempts to erase Ukraine. Coakley claims that Zhadan "belongs to a long line of poets playing a crucial role in Ukrainian culture" and has written numerous poetry books and novels about Ukraine's struggles and resilience against Russia's interventions. Their work may look different, but Nikitiuk and Zhadan's shared commitment to embody distinct Ukrainian identity through art

and poetry is what makes Zhadan and Dog's musical involvement in *What Have We Lost* extremely appropriate and meaningful.

The film ends with the children gathering around on the field shown in the first scene and singing "Children" by Zhadan and Dogs. Soon, Nikitiuk and other crew members join the children in front of the camera and sing along with them. The scene lasts for a little less than two minutes, and towards the end of the scene, the audio of Zhadan and Dog's recorded music of "Children" starts playing. The scene fades out, and the song remains throughout the credits. The symbolic significance of this ending for Nikitiuk's poetic voice can be highlighted through the meanings behind the song. Under the music video of "Children," the description explains this song as music about the children of Ukraine who will, sooner or later, lead the nation (Жадан і Собаки). It further explains that instead of fear for the uncertainties of Ukraine's future amidst Russia's intervention, this song dedicates hope and faith for the future that the Ukrainian children will build.

Such meanings behind Zhadan and Dog's music shine through as advocacy and care for the children. "Children" summons a great sense of resilience to the Ukrainian children who may be in fear or doubt, and Zhadan and Dog's solidarity with children in times of war and conflict mirrors Nikitiuk's cinematic advocacy for Ukrainian children who are forcefully facing war. From both artists, there is a profound shared understanding of the importance of Ukrainian children for Ukraine's future, as well as the significance of preserving children's experiences growing up in political turbulence through artistic creations. The symbolism behind incorporating "Children" in the film's ending is that the children whom Zhadan and Dogs deliver hope and confidence through music are now in front of the camera reciting that exact song, reminding themselves about perseverance after they have conveyed their inner realities living in

war through poetic imagery throughout the film. Nikitiuk ties together poetic imagery and music that both recognize the uniqueness of Ukrainian children's experiences with Russia's invasion and children's critical importance in preserving the Ukrainian identity throughout the future. Furthermore, Nikitiuk's own presence in the ending scene, singing the song with children, serves as a representation of her solidarity and togetherness with the children, in which she is not just treating the children as poetic material for her film, but rather as the people she stands with throughout this war.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyzed the experimental and formal elements of Nikitiuk's poetic voice in her short documentary *What Have We Lost*. I first distinguished the poetic voice of documentary filmmakers for its exclusive prioritization of stylistic qualities and aesthetics that highlight a distinct perspective of viewing the historical world instead of the conventional narrative and informational qualities of documentary films. Furthermore, I argued that Nikitiuk's poetic voice uniquely stands as an experimental exploration of conveying how Ukrainian children see and experience Russia's authoritarian invasion. Specifically, I focused on how Nikitiuk's imminent style of editing, metaphorical cinematography, and symbolic choice of music effectively achieve representations of the emotional experiences and internal reflections Ukrainian children endure as they grow up in war.

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, I further suggested that poetic voice poses several difficulties in conveying complex and controversial subjects like political conflict and war without romanticizing violence and suffering. In *What Have We Lost*, aesthetic and sensual qualities of images heavily dominate the filmmaker's poetic voice, which carry the potential risk of masking the atrocities of wars. However, building on my analyses of *What Have We Lost*, I argue that Nikitiuk's poetic voice and methodologies are appropriate in making a documentary about the Russia-Ukraine conflict because she clearly embraces the idea that Ukrainian children's way of experiencing and growing up in war is different from how adults perceive Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, the formal and sensual qualities are not for romanticizing, but rather to preserve the idea that children live through the war with a sensitivity of emotions, innocence, and imagination that distinctly symbolize childhood. Nikitiuk creates a

clear boundary reserved for Ukrainian children's perspectives, which is why her poetic voice is rare in the cohort of films about the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Chapter 3: Continuous and coherent storytelling of narrative voice in *Putin's War at Home*

Putin's War at Home is a production of *FRONTLINE*, a documentary broadcast program on PBS. Directed and produced by London-based journalist and documentary filmmaker Gesbeen Mohammad, along with co-producer and Russian journalist Vasiliy Kolotilov, *Putin's War at Home* follows Kolotilov's journey inside Russia as he captures the lives of six Russian activists who openly vocalize against Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Since the beginning of his invasion of Ukraine, Putin has been falsely justifying the invasion as a "special military operation," one which will save Ukrainian citizens from Ukrainian fascism supported by the West (Plokhy 152). In his address to Russian citizens in February 2022, Putin claimed that the goal of his operation is to "demilitarize" and "denazify" Ukraine, a testament to his ongoing propaganda efforts to manipulate Russian citizens' understandings of Ukraine's political systems and garner the Russian public's support (Plokhy 152). Mohammad claimed in an interview with *FRONTLINE* that after Putin passed new laws for cracking down on "fake news" in March 2022, she observed "a mass exodus of journalists in Russia" (Ingram). She further elaborated, "With all these journalists leaving and the crackdown on independent media inside Russia, we felt it was important to also shed light on what's happening to the people in the country who were continuing to oppose the war." With this observation, Putin's deliberate elimination of the freedom of expression and the freedom of the press in Russia is precisely what Mohammad and Kolotilov capture as Putin's war at home.

In this chapter, I will consider this political context and examine the *narrative voice* of *Putin's War at Home*. I argue that in this film, Mohammad and Kolotilov, together, carry a distinct narrative voice that tells the central story of how outside of Ukrainian borders, Putin has started yet another war in his own state against his own people, taking away their rights to

vocalize their political opinions. Nichols defines narrative voice as the type of voice in documentary films that "speaks through the story it tells" (56). He points out that within the narrative voice, the film's story itself is what stands out the most and converses the most with the audience with a distinct beginning, middle, and end of the story (56). Returning to the concept of continuity editing that was discussed in comparison to evidentiary editing of the rhetorical voice in Chapter 1, what Nichols' emphasis on beginning, middle, and end tells us about the narrative voice is that narrative voice takes us through a continuous flow between scenes and segments throughout the duration of the film for cohesive storytelling.

Specifically, in this chapter, I suggest that Mohammad and Kolotilov organize the continuity and cohesiveness of the main story about Putin's war in Russia through a conjunction of two layers: the first layer is Kolotilov's journey as the main investigator of the film and the second layer is the collection of individual stories from the six activists that Kolotilov investigates. I argue that this bilayer design of the narrative highlights the unique characteristic of continuity of the narrative voice, which bridges the gaps between the stories of six Russian activists and combines them into one extensive story about life inside Russia as a vocal opponent of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, I will highlight Kolotilov's participatory mode of filmmaking, which fundamentally enables the connections between the bilayer design of the narrative arc. Through this practice of narrative voice, Mohammad and Kolotilov interfere with Putin's propaganda that silences his critics and shed light on the daunting realities of being a Russian activist whose basic rights as a citizen are being murdered by Putin's dictatorship.

To provide a methodological lens for analyzing the narrative, I will be borrowing Bordwell and Thompson's explorations of the narrative form. Bordwell and Thompson define narrative form as "a type of cinematic organization in which the parts relate to one another

through a series of causally related events taking place in time and space" (503). Although Bordwell and Thompson predominantly examine fictional films, the scholars acknowledge that their theories could be applied to documentaries as well, demonstrated in films such as *Super Size Me* (Morgan Spurlock, 2004) and *Hoop Dreams* (Steve James, 1994) (72). Because the common foundational purpose of both fictional and nonfiction narrative films is storytelling, this chapter will not distinguish narrative forms of fiction and nonfiction.

Bordwell and Thompson identify the following as elements of narrative form: plot and story, cause and effect, time, space, and openings/closings/patterns of development (75). Incorporating these elements, I discuss how *Putin's War at Home* further accentuates its narrative qualities by embedding these elements into the bilayer design of the narrative arc.

3.1 Participatory mode in subjective journalistic documentary

Putin's War at Home is, by nature of being a *FRONTLINE* film, a journalistic documentary. It differs from the two other films discussed in this thesis in that it was created by journalists under a journalistic organization and is also partially a story about journalistic activism. Plantinga highlights that traditionally, a journalistic film "emphasizes a rhetoric of objectivity and the requirements of evidence over the creative presentation favored by Grierson" (29). Objectivity is the big arc of what we generally tend to believe journalism is, in which the expectation for journalists is that they listen to all sides of an issue and tell the stories of all parties involved.

Putin's War at Home, however, breaks this conventional expectation of how a journalistic film should tell stories. The film's narrative is clearly built with anti-Putin perspectives that frame Putin as an authoritarian who slaughters Russian citizens' basic rights to freedom of speech and freedom of expression. As Plantinga further states, even in journalistic documentaries, objectivity is "impossible" since "every film has a point of view both literally (the point of view of the camera) and figuratively (the point of view of the film's narration)" (30). Therefore, regardless of whether a documentary film has a journalistic background, if there is a distinct point of view embodied in the film, subjectivity is inevitable. This is especially the case in documentary films like *Putin's War at Home* where the filmmakers have a clear political conviction to achieve through storytelling. They are not interested in capturing stories from both sides of the conflict into their narrative voice.

Putin's War at Home is also the only documentary film discussed in this thesis that was broadcasted on a public television channel, engaging with a greater pool of audiences, and carrying that much bigger of a responsibility for ethical storytelling. Patricia Aufderheide

provides insight into public television's role in documentary ecology, particularly within the question of objectively portraying history on television documentaries: "Historical and cultural critics have often noted … that the construction of a 'both sides' narrative and the message of the success of the historical process in achieving national unity may misrepresent history and lead viewers to believe that the issues raised are resolved" (40). I find this to be incredibly relevant to Mohammad and Kolotilov's approach to the narrative of their film as well as the social issue they deal with. Putin's wars, both in Ukraine and in Russia, are very much ongoing. They are not resolved. Therefore, if Mohammad and Kolotilov decided to take an "objective" approach to this film and capture the stories of pro-Russian nationalist groups as well, their work could sugarcoat a serious authoritarian threat that certain Russians are risking their lives to fight against. Dismantling "mandatory" objectivity in journalistic films and instead appreciating journalistic films for their subjective takes on the narrative is foundational for understanding the significance of Mohammad and Kolotilov's narrative voice in *Putin's War at Home*.

Relatedly, placing the documentarian with clear convictions as the central participant of their own film comes with risks. While it is hard to deny that a documentarian's engagement with their subjects behind the camera is pivotal in making a nonfiction film, capturing the documentarian's involvement on camera, and intertwining them into the film's narrative poses the risk of misleadingly prioritizing the documentarian themselves over the cohesiveness of story they must deliver. It becomes unclear what the filmmaker's intention truly is: is it to tell a story about the historical world, or is it to talk about themselves in reflexive manners?

This brings me to my discussion on the participatory mode of documentary filmmaking in *Putin's War at Home.* Nichols argues that when we view participatory modes in documentary films, "we expect to witness the historical world as represented by someone who actively

engages with others rather than unobtrusively observing, poetically reconfiguring, or argumentatively assembling what others say and do" (Nichols 139). In other words, participatory mode grants viewers the awareness that the filmmaker is actively interacting with their subjects, rather than merely observing them from a distance. This mode of participation is exactly what Kolotilov undertakes in this film as the spearheading investigator scouting for Russian activists who are willing to share their stories in front of his cameras.

Importantly, Kolotilov's participatory mode of filmmaking and his direct interactions with the six activists are the central driving point of the continuous bilayer narrative arc in *Putin's War at Home*. The subjects of this film are from different regions of Russia and have no prior personal connections to each other. This means that without Kolotilov's presence, the film would be better described as a collection of independent stories from unrelated activists. The coherence of storytelling from beginning to end that characterizes a singular narrative voice would be absent. What bridges the gap between the gaps and different stories from the subjects is Kolotilov's physical travels to meet each person, from one to another, and the sequential narrative development of his investigative journey revealing the truth behind Putin's authoritarian regime. Furthermore, the two separate layers of the film's narrative interact back and forth, rather than be separated, through Kolotilov's presence. In other words, through participatory mode, Kolotilov is present in both the narrative form's first layer for his own investigative journey as well as in the second layer as a participatory observer of the activists' stories. Similarly, Kolotilov's participation effectively emphasizes the idea of "us" between him and the six subjects as vocal Russian activists who are unafraid to call out Putin's dictatorship, mirroring Nichols' claims that participatory mode "inflects the 'I speak about them to you'

formulation into something that is often closer to ‘I speak with them for you’ as the filmmaker’s interactions give us a distinctive window onto a particular portion of our world” (138).

While the narrative details behind Kolotilov’s contributions to the storytelling will be discussed in the next section, it is important to identify how his participatory involvement aligns with the goals of Mohammad and Kolotilov’s narrative voice. Despite the risks of the filmmaker’s participation I’ve mentioned earlier, Kolotilov’s appearance on screen is certainly beneficial to achieving the film’s narrative voice. This is because Kolotilov’s own motivations for participating in the film are established early in the film before he officially takes on his investigative journey: Kolotilov clearly states, “I wanted to give voice to the people who are opposing the war that Russia has started.” It becomes clear that the purpose behind Kolotilov’s participatory observation isn’t to merely tell his own story, but rather to head towards the central narrative voice, which is capturing the untold stories about Putin's efforts to silence his opposers in Russia.

3.2 First layer of the narrative: Vasiliy Kolotilov's journey inside Russia

In discussions about the narrative of a film, the distinction between the plot and the story is frequently confused. Although the plot and story seem similar, they serve different purposes in a narrative film. According to Bordwell and Thompson, the story is "all the events we see and hear, plus all those that we infer or assume to have occurred" and the plot is "the actual presentation of events in the story" (504-505). In other words, a film's story is the accumulation of everything that happens in a film, while a plot is the distinct and specific way that the story is presented. Within a filmmaker's creativity, a singular story can have multiple plots. As audiences, we are only introduced to the plot that the filmmaker decides to show us.

The bilayer design of *Putin's War at Home*'s narrative can further be explained in terms of story and plot. That is, the film presents the two layers of stories that are driven simultaneously and intertwined in a singular plot. Within this plot, before we are introduced to the six subjects, the film first establishes the first layer of the story by introducing Kolotilov and the initiation of his investigative journey that will be conveyed in the second layer. In the opening sequence, the camera captures Kolotilov in the dark outdoors of Moscow on the phone with a source who decides to pull out from the film because they fear government retaliation. Kolotilov then gets in a cab, and looks out at the city, as his voiceover narrates the current state of Russian society we will be seeing throughout the film: "People here are very scared to talk. But there are still people who don't want to be silent."

The film then shifts to Kolotilov's interview, where he reveals his clear motivation and goal with the film. Following this interview, the film transitions to a different scene of Kolotilov busily packing his camera equipment in his hotel room as his narration plays over: "The Russian government wants people to think that all Russians are supporting the war. It's not true. It

doesn't work like that." Kolotilov then leaves the room with his belongings, and the door shuts. His journey has begun.

From this opening sequence alone, it is clear that Kolotilov's investigative journey is the fundamental premise of the film's story, and he simultaneously serves as the initiator of the film's plot. It showcases the exact purpose of a narrative film's opening identified by Bordwell and Thompson: "The opening provides a basis for what is to come and initiates us into the narrative. It raises our expectations by setting up a specific range of possible causes for what we see" (85). Before the film dives deeper into the second layer of stories of the activists, it is already established that the film's narrative is initiated by and operates under a big arc of this specific journalist going on a mission to reveal the real consequences of Putin's authoritarian policies. In other words, Kolotilov is the person whose actions and decisions will impact what is captured in the narrative of the film and what is not. He and his journey are the narrative's main reference point. The cleverness behind this opening sequence is that it effectively delivers to the audience from whose perspective the narrative will be told, while also allowing the audience to create a connection with a "protagonist" who is risking his own life and career to embody the film's goal of narrative voice, which is to interfere Putin's Russian nationalist propaganda.

After the opening sequence, the plot sequentially leads us to the second layer of the narrative from the six Russian activists. During the introductions of each activist, Kolotilov's presence is intertwined and serves as the transition from one subject to another. For instance, when Olga and Elena, two journalists working together in remote Siberia, first appear in the film, Kolotilov explains in his interview that they write a blog exposing military deaths in Ukraine which Russia hides as a "state secret." Kolotilov further expresses his honest surprise at the two journalists not being in jail already for the work that they do. In another transition from one

subject to another, Kolotilov introduces Roman Melnichenko, a law professor from Volgograd who has been fired from his job after posting "NO TO WAR" on his Facebook page. Kolotilov states, "Roman is really worried about his parents because his parents are from Ukraine, and they are in Ukraine right now." Before Roman first appears on screen, Kolotilov's physical travel to Volgograd is captured in the film. In this sequence, the narrator says, "Vasiliy, the Russian journalist working with us, is on his way to the Southwest of the country to meet another outspoken critic of the war." We see a shot-by-shot sequence of Kolotilov walking through an airport, boarding his flight to Volgograd, and looking out the window of the plane from his seat.

Evidently, Kolotilov's own words about the subjects and the footage of his travels inside Russia are utilized as the connection and transition points in the plot between the first and second layers of the narrative, and also between the individual stories of the six subjects. This essentially serves two purposes. First, it establishes continuity in the film's narrative by reiterating that all the events we see in *Putin's War at Home* are connected by the overarching first layer of the narrative, which is Kolotilov's mission to discover stories about Russia's anti-war activists. What Kolotilov sees and hears from this investigation is what we eventually see and hear in the film. Kolotilov starts an investigative journey with a goal, and he must end the journey after achieving or not achieving that goal. Furthermore, Kolotilov provides connections between seemingly unrelated stories of the six subjects by establishing that these stories are one under his investigative journey and the film's central narrative about the lack of freedom in modern authoritative Russia. This provides the audience with opportunities to clearly perceive *Putin's War at Home* as a narrative film with a distinct beginning, middle, and end. Second, it builds Kolotilov's credibility through subjective interference, in which he is not simply observing the subjects from a distance. Rather, he is executing participatory observation as someone who is

also pursuing activism against the lies of Putin's propaganda through making this film and has a substantial understanding of the risks of living in Russia as Putin's opponent, which legitimizes why he is the appropriate person to take on a journey like this and determine the directions of the film's narrative voice.

Long shots of Kolotilov's interviews with subjects create similar effects of transition and coherence. While most interviews with subjects are conveyed through medium shots and medium close-up shots that highlight the individual's postures and facial expressions, the film also includes long shots of these interviews that capture the entire studio space and Kolotilov sitting by the cameras, observing the interviewees, and asking them questions on the spot. Kolotilov's presence brings proximity in these interviews, in which the words spoken by the activists aren't just addressed to the camera but are also active responses to Kolotilov who is hearing them at those very moments. Kolotilov's presence here is what maintains the interactions between the bilayer format of the story and plot, between a journalist who has a distinct narrative to deliver and his subjects who are contributing their own stories as part of that narrative.

After diving into the activists' stories in the second layer of the narrative arc (which will be further discussed in the next section), the film's ending circles back to the opening. In the ending sequence, Kolotilov sits in a dim room and watches news clips about Russian men fleeing the country after Putin announced partial mobilization. Kolotilov decides that he also needs to flee the country to avoid being drafted, stating, "This partial mobilization means that the situation is getting worse, and they might close the borders. I need to leave as soon as possible." He then closes a packed suitcase, hurries down the stairs of the building, gets in a car, and looks out at the city through the car's window. This is a parallel from the opening scene in Moscow when Kolotilov is in a cab looking out the window, reflecting on the repressed state of Russian

society as he is about to start his upcoming journey. Except now, rather than preparing for the start of his investigative exploration inside Russia, Kolotilov is now headed to leave Russian soil, looking out at the city for perhaps the last time in a while. In a post-production interview with *FRONTLINE*, Kolotilov revealed that he was in St. Petersburg for a final shoot with Sonia, one of the six subjects, when Putin announced partial mobilization. With no plan or certainty, he "just took [his] bag, took the first train to Moscow, packed another bag and just got a ticket on the way and left the same night" (Ingram). The ending sequence plays over Kolotilov's narration, in which he states, "The story about opposing the war has become the story about the future of Russia. Will that future be authoritarian, or will it be democratic? This is the fight at hand. The story of the people who are trying to confront the regime is still going to continue. Sadly, now, we're going to be looking at this from a distance."

As the first and second layers of the film's narrative arc come to an end, the ending sequence communicates to us that Kolotilov has achieved the initial goal he stated in the beginning. Although his final shoot with Sonia was unfinished, he did give voice to those who are opposing the war in Ukraine, and the stories he captured from them have been delivered as a discourse for conversations about the future of Russia's democracy. The question remains how Kolotilov's new journey outside of Russia will now look like, but that is beyond the scope of this film. Kolotilov and Mohammad successfully execute a narrative voice by ending with a powerful note about what the consequences of telling stories in an oppressive country like Russia are, that is, being forced to leave one's own country or accept the faith of forcefully fighting in a war. As Nichols states, narratives "end by returning to the initial problem, lack, or need and resolving it" (57). Whether Kolotilov's investigative journey is successful because he did give voice to those who are unafraid to oppose the war, or unsuccessful because he eventually had to flee the

country, is up to interpretation of the viewer. However, the continuity and coherence of the film remain in that the film's narrative returns to the initiation of Kolotilov's investigative journey and leaves us with the contemplation on how the stories from his journey will reflect the future of Russian democracy.

There are cases of other documentary films in which similar methods of engaging the filmmaker's participation as a layer of the film's narrative arc have not been as effective. *Superpower* (Sean Penn, 2023) captures actor and filmmaker Sean Penn's journey inside Ukraine during the early days of Russia's invasion. Penn is the director but also a definitive participant in his own narrative documentary — his personal reflections on exploring a country at war as a celebrity and his conversations with Ukrainian officials (most notably Zelenskyy) are all captured in the film. While Penn had all the right intentions to make a documentary film about the socio-political state of Ukraine and convert his stardom into a powerful message about the urgency to support Ukraine, the film rather delivers as a documentary about Sean Penn, a worldwide famous star reflecting on his heroism as he risks his life to stand with the Ukrainian people.

What is missing from *Superpower* is the narrative cohesiveness between Penn's political explorations of Ukraine and his own stories as an actor involved in politics. Penn tried to achieve everything all in one: a political exploration of Ukraine, justification for a celebrity visiting a war zone, and the connection between his fame and the war in Ukraine. However, the lack of narrative connections between such numerous intentions behind Penn's storytelling is what contributed to the loss of his central voice as a storyteller. It is clear in *Putin's War at Home* that Kolotilov serves as the bridge between the multiple layers of stories in the film, and those layers lead to one narrative objective: delivering the primary story about life under Russian

authoritarianism as a vocal opponent of Putin's war. Therefore, the film utilizes Kolotilov as a tool for gluing the narrative together to its central direction. It is difficult to say the film is about Vasiliy Kolotilov as an individual. On the other hand, in *Superpower*, it is unclear what contribution Penn's presence has to the seamless continuity of the film's narrative, especially if he wanted to tell the story of Ukraine. *Superpower* can yield its own separate analysis, but I bring this into the discussion to examine how the filmmaker's participatory mode being incorporated into the layers of the film's narrative arc has a greater chance of strengthening the filmmaker's voice when there is clarity of purpose in doing so. *Superpower* demonstrates the case of how a multilayered narrative of a documentary film does not yield an acute narrative voice when it is unclear what the filmmaker's involvement has amounted to from beginning to end, and what exactly it is that the filmmaker is trying to achieve with the stories they tell.

3.3 Second layer of the narrative: Six Russian activists' stories

Putin's War at Home conveys quite an unusual perspective of viewing the modern Russia-Ukraine conflict because it is distinctly from the point of view of Russians who oppose Putin. Interestingly, *Putin's War at Home* rarely conveys stories about Ukraine. Many films about Russia's invasion of Ukraine have heavily focused on the socio-political state of Ukraine and Ukrainians, emphasizing the injustices they've endured through storytelling. As demonstrated by films such as *Superpower*, *Slava Ukraini* (Bernard-Henri Lévy, 2023), and *20 Days in Mariupol* (Mstyslav Chernov, 2023), many filmmakers take an interest in visiting Ukraine and capturing the country that has been invaded, not the country that caused the invasion. This is not surprising considering how since the start of Putin's invasion, Ukraine has been predominantly viewed and treated as the sole victim by the rest of the world.

Putin's War at Home, however, isn't simply about Ukraine. It is about Russia. It is a story about how ordinary Russians who oppose Putin's invasion are also victims of this war. When we look deeper into the second layer of the film's narrative form, *Putin's War at Home* questions Putin's authoritarian regime and its social impacts, the legitimacy of his invasion of Ukraine, and how it is shaping Russia's volatile future of democracy and freedom. Such discourses are provided through the narratives that compose Kolotilov's investigations. The distinct Russian point of view is conveyed through the identities and ramifications of the Russian activists which are delivered through the diverse range of space and cause and effects.

As briefly mentioned in the previous sections, Kolotilov's journey takes place in multiple locations throughout Russia because the six activists reside in different parts of Russia. Though separated, these locations are shown connectively in the second layer of the narrative arc by allowing us to sequentially follow Kolotilov's investigation from one place to another. The

concept of "space" is an element of the narrative form Bordwell and Thompson divide into two categories: story space and plot space (84). Story space refers to the "locale of the totality of the action (whether shown or not)," and in *Putin's War at Home*, the story space includes the entirety of Russian and Ukrainian territories (Bordwell and Thompson 504). Plot space, however, is the "locale visibly and audibly represented in the scenes" (Bordwell and Thompson 504). While the greater borders of Russia and Ukraine are represented in the dialogues about their political conflict, the primary plot space of *Putin's War at Home* is the four specific regions of Russia Kolotilov visits. From Moscow (central Russia), remote Siberia (eastern Russia), Volgograd (southwestern Russia), to St. Petersburg (northwestern Russia), Kolotilov travels great distances inside Russia to meet the activists and observe the way their lives have been impacted by Putin's politics. As such, although Kolotilov's investigation creates continuity between these different locations, it is worth pointing out how the transitions between various plot spaces contribute as the story's implication of how widely Putin's authoritarian practices have spread across the grand territory of Russia.

The primary value of the diversity of plot spaces within Russia is that it symbolizes the magnitude of Putin's undeniable impact. Instead of merely examining places in Russia that are familiar to the global audience, such as Moscow or St. Petersburg, the filmmakers also reach out to unfamiliar areas where not many people pay attention to or associate with the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The takeaway from this flexible use of plot space is that Putin's oppression reaches nearly every corner of the country, even the remote areas. If there was no such diversity in plot spaces, the stories about the lived consequences of Putin's authoritarianism would be reduced to a minor and local phenomenon, rather than a nationwide threat. Instead, the filmmakers narratively voice out to the audience how in different parts of Russia, there are those who

actively oppose the war on Ukraine, and Putin's dictatorial control over these people is an imminent and urgent threat to the democratic freedom of Russia.

Similar to how Putin's impacts reach a wide range of physical locations inside Russia, his repression also extends as a cause of various effects in the stories of the six activists' lives. Cause and effect's contribution lies in the idea that "narrative depends so heavily on changes created by cause and effect" and "the changes are brought about by characters" (Bordwell and Thompson 77). The effects of Putin's policies range from professional consequences to familial conflicts and restraints in a romantic relationship, all captured in the second layer of the film's narrative. The causes and effects serve the film's narrative voice as the larger range of tangible social experiences of Russian citizens that have become inevitable consequences of Putin's political oppression.

For Sonia Subbotina and her girlfriend Sasha Skochilenko, that consequence is Sasha's arrest that completely changed the trajectory of their lives. Sonia used to work as a pharmacist in St. Petersburg until Sasha was arrested for "spreading false information about the Russian government." What Sasha really did was put labels on supermarket price tags that exposed numbers and information on the human costs of the war that Putin's government kept from its citizens. This was a subtle demonstration against the war, but Putin's laws targeting anti-war protests put Sasha in jail. Sonia speaks on behalf of Sasha in the film and shares her journey of supporting Sasha's release. Sasha has a lawyer, bail money, and supportive documents for her release, but the judge denies her requests. At the end of the film, Sasha receives extended detention in jail with no definitive answers about her future. A later report from *FRONTLINE* on November 2023 revealed that Sasha was found guilty and has been sentenced to seven years in

prison. Sonia and Sasha's story demonstrates the cause and effect between Putin's merciless authoritarian control and the realities of imprisonment a couple must face.

Olga Mutovina and Elena Trifonova's activism are even bolder and they too, face the risks of state punishment for their outspokenness. Olga and Elena are investigative journalists working in the remote areas of Siberia where Russia's minority groups reside. The Russian military heavily recruits from these groups. Olga and Elena's primary work is disclosing information about Russian soldiers from the area who died in the war. The Russian government considers information about fallen soldiers a state secrecy, and Olga and Elena believe that if Russian citizens knew the truth about how many Russian lives are being sacrificed for this war, they would be compelled to oppose the war more openly. Olga and Elena's website has been accused of false information by the Russian government, but warnings from the government didn't stop them from continuing their work. At the end of the documentary, it is revealed that the two journalists and their families have fled Russia, and the location was not revealed.

Natalia (who requested not to disclose her last name) from St. Petersburg and Roman Melnichenko from Volgograd both experience massive shifts in their family relationships since the war. Natalia is an activist on TikTok who uses her platform to share anti-war protests in Russia and the government's brutality against activists. Natalia's activism, which exposes sides of Russia that are hidden from state media, not only goes against Putin's policies but has also garnered disapproval from her family as well. Her mother, who has different political views from her, is not supportive of her online social media activism. Natalia also personally experienced loss because of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. When Russia started facing government sanctions, her father, who had cancer, could not receive chemotherapy due to the hospital's lack of resources. Natalia has a very small number of Russian followers on social media, but she reaches

a wide range of global followers with her content about the truth about the Russian government. Like Olga and Elena, Natalia also fled Russia, and her current location was not revealed.

As mentioned earlier, Roman is a law professor from Volgograd who was fired from his job after he posted "NO TO WAR" on his Facebook page. Roman's post was motivated by the atrocities in Ukraine he sees and hears directly through calling his parents. Roman's elderly parents reside in Ukraine, facing multiple shelling every day, but they decided to "accept their fate" and not seek refuge in their old age. Fired from his job, Roman is now left with a completely different life of legal accusations for "spreading false information" on social media, fear for his parents' lives, and even political hostility with his daughter. Roman's teenage daughter, who is being fed Russian propaganda at school, is already convinced by pro-Russian ideologies. She does not agree with Roman's opposition to Putin's war, and Roman expresses that as someone who has lived in the former USSR, he could not bear his children living through the tragedies of such a society. As the war continues, Roman continues to worry for his parents while facing the harsh realities of being an unwelcome outsider in an authoritarian, propaganda-filled society.

These stories are incredibly rich in their demonstrations of the effects of the main cause that drives the narrative layers of *Putin's War at Home*: Putin's propaganda, authoritative repression, and violence. By paying close attention to the stories of the six activists in the second layer, Mohammad and Kolotilov shatter the thriving images of Russian nationalism Putin spreads as lies. Together, Mohammad and Kolotilov present a daunting storytelling in Putin's Russia that juxtaposes what Putin wants the rest of the world to believe, and these stories are delivered even more effectively because they are deeply personal. Putin may have started this conflict with Ukraine and Russia's democracy politically, but its effects are immensely

intertwined with the intimate aspects of the Russian activists' lives. The stories about a single authoritarian's invasive influence on ordinary citizens' personal relationships, love, wellness, family, and the right to be safe in their own country show how powerful yet dangerous the Russian president is. Without narrating such a convoluted relationship between Putin's dictatorial actions and the consequential fate of vocal Russian anti-war activists, Mohammad and Kolotilov would be left with little context to prove Putin wrong through storytelling.

Returning to the intersections between the two layers of the film's narrative, this joint contribution of the six activists' stories unites them under the central narrative of Kolotilov's journey inside Russia revealing the truth behind Putin's dictatorship. This unity is what gives continuity and coherence to the storytelling of the film, granting the filmmakers a clear narrative voice. Specifically, the diversity in cause and effect reminds me of Robert McKee's perspective on the relationship between structure and character: "Structure and character are interlocked. The event structure of a story is created out of the choices that characters make under pressure and the actions they choose to take, while characters are the creatures who are revealed and changed by how they choose to act under pressure" (166).

Although Robert McKee is a scholar of screenwriting, I suggest his sentiment here is strongly applicable to *Putin's War at Home*. Besides the distinction that they are real people with real consequences, Kolotilov and the six Russian activists in this film are also filled with choices and actions, much like fictional characters. McKee points out that story structure is catalyzed by what the characters decide to do "under pressure," and this is exactly what is showcased in the storytelling of *Putin's War at Home*. The overarching threats and restraints of Putin's authoritarian regime are the pressure that all Russians must live through, and specifically, the vocal anti-war activists' choices to act against such regime are the actions that drive the events of

the stories of their lives. From the beginning of the film to the end, it is Kolotilov and the six activists' constant choices of taking actions, making choices, and receiving consequences of those actions and choices, that establish the continuity of events that allows the film to convey a distinct narrative voice. In other words, their commitment to unwavering anti-war activism inside Russia is the catalyst of the achievement of a continuous and coherent narrative voice in *Putin's War at Home*.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how Mohammad and Kolotilov achieve narrative voice through continuity and coherence within the bilayer design of their film's narrative arc. Furthermore, I included Bordwell and Thompson's elements of narrative form and how these elements accentuate the storytelling behind the filmmakers' narrative voice. The elements I discussed included plot, story, time (temporal order), openings and endings, space, and cause and effect. I argued that together, the bilayer design and the elements of narrative form deliver the central story of Mohammad and Kolotilov's narrative voice, which is about how Putin's authoritative and dictatorial repression has made his opponents and peaceful protestors inside Russia yet another victim of his war.

What truly pushes forward Mohammad and Kolotilov's narrative voice for *Putin's War at Home* is Kolotilov and the six activists' refusal to stay silent as Russian citizens. Their commitment to act against Putin's dictatorship and choose to share their stories in front of the camera knowing very well what the punishments could be, is the primary building block of this film's demonstration of a definitive anti-Putin narrative viewpoint. Therefore, the emphasis on storytelling of narrative voice is appropriate for *Putin's War at Home* as it embodies how stories can break the barriers of the lies that we are fed by powerful people. The coherent storytelling of Mohammad and Kolotilov communicates to us Western audiences that there is significant value in examining how Putin's invasion of Ukraine is not just a war between Putin and the Ukrainians, but also between Putin and the people of Russia who believe in peace and democracy.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I stressed the value of understanding the voice of documentary filmmakers as their methodological intentionality behind cinematically conveying their viewpoints about the world around us. I built several analyses of the different types of voices of documentarians by analyzing three documentary films with my foundational argument that, unlike the misleading perception that documentary films are objective, documentarians practice subjective intervention when delivering images and stories on the screen to the audience. The historical world I specifically focused on is the lives of ordinary Ukrainian and Russian civilians throughout the modern developments of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Russia's authoritarianism. With this incorporation of socio-political context, I sought to dig deeper into the cinematic methodologies that documentarians utilize to shape their distinct voice and to deliver their personal conviction about the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

I chose three documentary films — *Winter on Fire*, *What Have We Lost*, and *Putin's War at Home* — that I evaluated to be the most suitable for each of the three types of voice of documentary filmmakers that film scholar Bill Nichols identifies: rhetorical voice, poetic voice, and narrative voice. First, I referenced existing literature to investigate what functions each type of voice carries and how the filmmakers discussed in this thesis took advantage of these functions to clearly organize their subjective opinions through filmmaking. Throughout the chapters, I've outlined the distinct goal of each type of voice: rhetorical voice seeks to achieve persuasion of the filmmaker's argument through evidence, poetic voice prioritizes installing a distinct perspective through formal qualities and patterns, and narrative voice pursues continuity and coherence that utilize stories as the lens of a subjective viewpoint. Then, I connected these distinct goals of each voice to the three documentary films, conducting textual analyses to better

understand how the documentarians transferred their socio-political views about Russia's authoritarian regime against Ukraine into each type of cinematic voice using different languages in documentary filmmaking. In this process, I also referenced the filmmaker's own statements about their films and the processes behind their production.

Through my analyses, I outlined how various filmmaking strategies help filmmakers achieve their personal goals with their films and I found that the versatile use of various cinematic techniques is necessary for documentarians to achieve the voice of their desires. I argue that this is because voice is not merely what the filmmaker's viewpoint about the world is, but *how* a filmmaker portrays that viewpoint through the act of filmmaking. Furthermore, I found that the filmmakers utilized a unique voice and methods corresponding to such voice to deliver their viewpoints against Russia's modern authoritarianism that are transferred as elements of filmmaking in each of their documentary films. The elements of cinematic techniques that I identified in the three films included but were not limited to, selection of character, editing, cinematography, and multilayered narrative design. Importantly, using the evidence of my analysis, I justified how each voice and methodology purposely chosen and used by the filmmakers are appropriate and applicable to explaining their personal convictions about Russia's authoritative attempts to erase the Ukrainian identity. Utilizing both filmmaker interviews and my own analyses, I claimed that the voices of documentary filmmakers bridge the connection between the pursuit of documentary filmmaking and the filmmaker's artistic socio-political activism.

The contribution of this thesis to the greater body of documentary studies is that it provides new interpretations of the meaning, functions, and methodologies behind the voice of documentary filmmakers. Returning to the discussion about documentary films and objective

reality, the significance of this thesis' analytic examination is that it highlights the filmmaker's intentionality behind documentary filmmaking. I suggest that too often, documentary filmmakers are perceived as people who merely stand behind their cameras, follow their subjects as invisible figures, and deliver the raw footage they filmed to the audiences with little to no editing or post-production manipulation. Not only is this perception an incorrect assumption of how documentary films are made, but it also eliminates the audiences' opportunities to take away what the filmmaker truly has to say about the part of the world they capture and the images they decide to share with the public. As I argue throughout the chapters, the driving motivation behind documentary productions, specifically films that convey strong socio-political viewpoints, is the filmmaker's own conviction. In other words, documentarians are not bystanders in the historical world they are capturing. Scholar Jerry Rothwell reiterates this sentiment, stating that "the filmmaker is not just a collector of images" (156). Watching documentaries, I believe, should be a practice of constantly identifying this conviction, asking what it is that the filmmaker is trying to do or say about the world around us and why it matters for us to take the time to watch and care about the stories of people, places, and societies we don't necessarily have connections to.

To elaborate on my utilization of the three types of voice of documentary filmmakers identified by Bill Nichols, I acknowledge that there is a need for additional theoretical identifications of voice that can be applied to a more diverse range of documentary films. In today's media landscape where traditional routes and techniques of filmmaking are no longer mandatory, and various experimentations of documentary filmmaking are constantly being developed and invented by both professional and amateur filmmakers, Nichols' theories do carry limitations of adaptability in a rapidly transforming creative field (Austin and de Jong 1). I

especially came across this limitation during the process of selecting films for this thesis. The overarching frame of this thesis was dependent on the films that I chose, and although I discovered a wide range of documentarians who made films about the Russia-Ukraine conflict, it was difficult to connect many of these filmmakers with a specific theoretical type of voice analyzed in documentary studies. My suggestion on the need for more versatile and elaborative academic investigations on the voice of documentary filmmakers is not directed towards Nichols specifically, but rather to the greater community of film studies that can inclusively explore a plethora of voices of documentary filmmakers and effectively articulate today's transformative climate of documentary filmmaking.

However, I wish to further suggest that documentarians themselves should also carry extensive knowledge and understanding of the achievement and utilization of a distinct voice in their films. During my film selection processes, I also observed that many documentary films convey socio-political messages about Russia's invasion of Ukraine or Putin's authoritarian policies, but the messages were not cinematically conveyed in a coherent voice that the filmmakers can claim as their own. Again, voice is not about what, but about how. Achieving a particular voice as a documentary filmmaker and carrying personal viewpoints require complex methodologies of filmmaking. It is more than a filmmaker directly saying to the audience, "This is what I think and what I believe." The cinematic procedures that shape the voice of documentary filmmakers are what makes each voice unique, which is why I further urge the gravity of documentarians' deep reflection on the meaning and function of voice. While theories are critical in understanding films, theories cannot develop themselves if filmmakers do not provide filmic evidence that can support the textual arguments of the theories.

Lastly, I want to take the time to discuss my particular focus on civilians' lives inside the Russia-Ukraine conflict amidst Russia's authoritarian regime, a major ongoing humanitarian crisis that I believe deserves great attention from the global society. Relatedly, I acknowledge that this thesis belongs to film and media studies, and therefore inevitably prioritizes cinematic explorations over thorough political and philosophical insights on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The intricacies of the sociological, political, and philosophical implications surrounding this political unrest reach far back to centuries-long histories of the two nations, which is beyond the scope of this thesis' primary focus on the voice of documentary filmmakers. However, I claim that my analytical development of this thesis is driven by my awareness of the sufferings and brutalities that countless Ukrainian citizens and Russian anti-war activists are facing, along with my acknowledgment of Ukraine as an authentically independent nation. Much like the filmmakers discussed in this thesis, my motives for this project also came from personal convictions to be vocal about the political injustices happening in Russia and Ukraine and the consequences of politics and power, as well as to shed light on the commitment of documentarians who risk their own freedom to inspire artistic socio-political activism against Putin's war through creative endeavors.

Recently, Ukrainian journalist and filmmaker Mstyslav Chernov won the Academy Award for Best Documentary (feature) for his film *20 Days in Mariupol* at the 96th Academy Awards. *20 Days in Mariupol*, also a *FRONTLINE* film, captures the atrocities and damages from Russia's invasion of the Ukrainian city of Mariupol. I conclude my thesis with a powerful statement from Chernov's speech: "This is the first Oscar in Ukrainian history and I'm honored. But probably, I will be the first director on this stage who will say I wish I never made this film. I wish to be able to exchange this to Russia never attacking Ukraine, never occupying our cities"

(ABC). Although one documentarian and one documentary film cannot change the course of a war, and although documentarians like Chernov would be willing to exchange success in their filmmaking career with peace, Chernov's words serve as a significant reminder of the undeniable power of the voice of documentary filmmakers and making even the slightest impact in society through nonfiction cinema.

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