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**The Appearance of the Subject in Contemporary (Creative) Documentary**

Authorial Interventions at the Border of Reality and Fiction

**Thesis Booklet**

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## Overview

The dissertation examines the field of contemporary documentary filmmaking, particularly the phenomenon of "creative documentary", deliberately focused on international (mostly European and North-American) works released between 2004 and 2024, as well as their Hungarian counterparts. I explore their conceptual framework, substantive characteristics, and especially the dimensions of directorial intervention and presence.

The research centers on how the documentary film genre transformed during the first decades of the 21st century, when the traditional observational camera was increasingly supplanted by directorial presence, subjective perspective, and creative reinterpretation of reality as defining characteristics.

Among other inquiries, the study seeks to answer how creative documentary can be positioned within the historical and theoretical context of documentary film, what new narrative and formal approaches it employs, and how the director's role is modified within creative documentary works.

## Hypotheses and Results

### 1. The definition of creative documentary

**Hypothesis:** The precise definition of the term "creative documentary" is missing from professional discourse: it is unclear whether it is a genre, subgenre, method, or style. The content and boundaries of the concept are unclear.

**Result:** The research confirmed that creative documentary can be simultaneously interpreted as a method, style, and genre direction, but most accurately defined as a conceptual umbrella term. I identified approximately a dozen characteristics of creative documentary, which are based on authorial perspective, aesthetic consciousness, and subjective reinterpretation of reality, and concepts of truth (with particular reference to Werner Herzog's ecstatic truth). Although it cannot be considered a genre in the classical sense, it rather denotes a creative position that transcends the boundaries of traditional documentarism.

## **2. The roots and development of creative documentary**

**Hypothesis:** It is questionable whether creative documentary is merely a passing experiment or an organic evolution of the documentary tradition, a postmodern heir to (post-)Griersonian and (post-)Vertovian types, or perhaps a unique blend of direct cinema and cinéma vérité.

**Result:** My research confirmed that creative documentary is an organic evolution of the documentary tradition, which radically extends its boundaries. The examination of the deliberately selected period between 2004-2024 showed that creative documentary has clearly achieved a dominant position in the international film industrial and festival scene. It cannot therefore be considered a tentative attempt, but an inevitable development of 21st century formal language, combining the legacy of direct cinema and cinéma vérité with fictional elements. This hybrid approach has opened a new chapter in the history of documentary.

## **3. Representation in the the filmtheoretical literature**

**Hypothesis:** It is questionable to what extent the film industry, and especially the scholarly literature, has recognized and described the phenomenon of creative documentary, and what theoretical grounding and space it provides for it.

**Result:** The research revealed that although the term "creative documentary " is less present in theoretical literature (especially among Anglo-Saxon theorists, they prefer to call "hybrid "), it is a widely used expression in professional practice and film discourse. The processed literature and interviews conducted during the research show that in professional conversations, workshops, festival catalogs, and film financing platforms, "creative documentary" is an accepted and understood concept, a quality label primarily in the European film environment. Among theorists, Stella Bruzzi's theory of performativity, Bill Nichols's representation mode system, and, more recently, Luke W. Moody's theories of the "non-binary " and of hybridity, as well as Dara Waldron's concept of the "new non-fiction film " provide a partial theoretical framework for interpreting this type of film.

#### **4. The role of directorial intervention**

**Hypothesis:** Creative documentary strongly implies the creative (directorial) appearance, performance, and intervention in the film. It is questionable to what extent this is a necessary component of creative documentary, and in what forms it appears.

**Result:** The research confirmed that directorial intervention has become one of the defining characteristics of creative documentary. This is not merely an aesthetic decision but follows from the internal logic of the genre. A systematic examination of the forms and extent of directorial intervention showed that the process was shaped by numerous factors, including practical and personal reasons, historical, technical, and industry aspects, as well as changing viewer expectations. Directorial omnipotence is continuously strengthening: often the creator becomes the subject or object of their film. The role of intervention is manifested not only in the filmmaking processes but also in the functional changes of the director, opening new dimensions for film narrative and viewer experience.

The research provides a comprehensive systematization of different forms and levels of directorial intervention, identifying the typification of creative presence and different degrees of intervention. This systematization is not only descriptive but also serves as an analytical tool for analyzing contemporary documentaries.

At the same time, the research refuted that directorial intervention, especially the director's physical appearance in the film, would be a necessary component of creative documentary. Although directorial intervention is indeed more common in creative documentaries, there are numerous works that carry other features of creative documentary (e.g., use of fictional tools, subjective viewpoint) without the director physically appearing in the film or explicitly intervening in the course of events. Directorial presence is therefore a possibility, but not a necessary component of the genre.

#### **5. The problem of boundary situations between fiction and reality**

**Hypothesis:** Creative documentary raises various dichotomies beyond the traditionally examined reality-fiction, reality-truth pairs. The question is where the boundary between fiction and reality lies in this film type.

**Result:** The research revealed that an essential characteristic of creative documentaries is the conscious combination of fictional and documentary tools. Intentionality plays a significant role as a fictionalizing factor: such films, although they appear to be content-based, phenomenon-like, life-like works, are fundamentally artificially structured, constructed, and move toward fiction at the moment of their creation. The boundaries between reality and fiction are deliberately blurred, yet this does not mean abandoning ethical responsibility, rather it signals the development of a new kind of reflexive relationship to the presented reality.

An important realization of the research is that creative documentary offers a new type of "reality contract" for the viewer, which is not based on the promise of objectivity or factuality, but on the search for subjective truth and the recognition of the creative perspective.

I argue, that instead of the dichotomy of reality and fiction, it is more productive to talk about the layering and interaction of different "reality layers" (factual, emotional, representational, and constructed reality), potentially even about a reality rewritten, reconstructed or diverted.

## **6. The question of authorship in hybrid documentary**

**Hypothesis:** If we accept the genre of hybrid documentary, then the question of hybrid authorship also arises: who can be considered the author(s) of a documentary?

**Result:** The research confirmed that the question of authorship is particularly complex in the case of creative documentaries. While the director's role remains decisive, the dynamics of the director-subject relationship transform: in many cases, the model of the coordinated subject (follow-up documentary) or the withdrawn subject (situative documentary) prevails. The boundary between director and subject is subject to continuous renegotiation, as is the "ownership" of the story. The research revealed that the question of agency (right of representation and storytelling) is becoming increasingly important, yet the final authorial role remains with the director, who ultimately dominates the narrative through story shaping and editing.

## 7. Forms of personal presence

**Hypothesis:** One of the most characteristic forms of creative documentary is new-personality, enhanced first-person storytelling, facilitated by technological development.

**Result:** The research confirmed that "new-personality" has indeed become one of the dominant characteristics of creative documentary. The increase in the number of one-person films, the direct presence and voice of the director, and the emphasis on subjective viewpoint are clearly demonstrable trends. In addition to technological development (lighter, cheaper, better quality cameras, sound recorders), institutional influences such as international workshops (e.g., DOK.Incubator) or the demands of streaming platforms played a significant role in the rise of personality. An increase in personality can be observed in both in films that are situational (based on specific situations) and longitudinal (following subjects over time), albeit in different forms. While in longitudinal films the model of the coordinated subject often prevails, in situational films the withdrawn subject dominates. Because of this, the dissertation pays particular attention to the works of Helena Třeštíková, Lea Glob, Kirsten Johnson, Marcel and Paweł Łoziński, and Agnès Varda.

The research reveals that technological development has not only enabled but fundamentally transformed the practice of documentary making, facilitating the emergence of one-person films in which the creator simultaneously becomes observer and observed, creating a peculiar reflexive dimension.

## 8. Reinterpretation of traditional documentary modes

**Hypothesis:** Traditional documentary modes (especially observational film) have entered a crisis and are in transformation.

**Result:** The research confirmed that the classical form of observational film has indeed entered a crisis, and various metamorphoses have appeared. Instead of the ideal of the "perfect observational film," "imperfect" versions came to the fore, which recognize and even use the necessary limitation of the observer position as a dramatic element. With the distinction of "sharp, blurred, cataractous gazes," I demonstrated that new approaches have developed along the intensity, consciousness, and stylization of observation. Among the films

discussed here, the following are of particular note: *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*, *General Idi Amin Dada: A Self-Portrait*, and *Anything Can Happen*.

The research refuted the assumption that traditional documentary theories would be obsolete. Although the earlier theoretical frameworks indeed need supplementation, they cannot be considered outdated. Nichols' representation mode system, for example, still provides a useful starting point, but needs to be applied more flexibly, recognizing that contemporary works often combine multiple modes.

## **Refuted hypotheses**

### **1. Creative documentary as a new phenomenon**

**Original assumption:** Creative documentary is a relatively new, previously non-existent phenomenon that emerged in the 2000s.

**Refutation:** The research showed that although the terminology of "creative documentary" is indeed more recent (especially in the Hungarian film environment), the roots of the phenomenon itself, its early signs of life, date back decades. Films were made as early as the '70s (for example, by Agnès Varda or Gyula Gazdag) that can be considered creative documentaries by today's concepts. The expression therefore does not denote a new phenomenon, but rather a long-existing, slowly developing, only newly named and very large repository direction of documentary practice.

### **2. Counterparts of creative documentary**

**Original assumption:** Creative documentary stands in opposition to the tradition of direct cinema and cinéma vérité.

**Refutation:** During the research, it became clear that creative documentary does not stand in opposition to the tradition of direct cinema or cinéma vérité, but rather has integrated certain elements of them while extending their toolkit. The observational-participatory method is still present, just in a new approach, often combined with other film techniques. This is not a denial of previous methods, but rather their further development, reinterpretation, and, to some extent, transcendence. At the same time, based on various stylistic, narrative, and

formal features, it can clearly be distinguished from a “traditional,” “television-style” documentary, and this distinction is evident not only in festival selections but also in distributors’ catalogs and television networks’ portfolios.

### **3. Complete rejection of objectivity**

**Original assumption:** Creative documentary completely breaks with the claim of objectivity and focuses exclusively on the subjective approach.

**Refutation:** The research showed that although the subjective viewpoint has indeed become more emphasized, this does not mean the complete rejection of objectivity. Creative documentaries strive for credibility, authenticity and for capturing some form of reality, just acknowledging that this always happens from a given viewpoint, through a personal filter. The majority of the examined creators showed that they wish to present the variously interpreted and referenced "truth," even if they do so with subjective means.

### **4. Assumption of terminological uniformity**

**Original assumption:** The use and interpretation of the term "creative documentary" is uniform in the international film profession.

**Refutation:** The research revealed that there are significant differences in the use and interpretation of the expression not only between geographical regions (e.g., European vs. American approach) but also between generations, creative groups. While in Europe, "creative documentary" is an established concept, American literature and practice rather use the terminology "hybrid documentary" to describe similar phenomena.

### **5. Universality of directorial intervention**

**Original assumption:** Directorial intervention, especially the director's physical appearance in the film, is a necessary component of creative documentary.

**Refutation:** Although directorial intervention is indeed more common in creative documentaries, the research showed that this is not a universal characteristic. There are numerous works that carry other features of creative documentary (e.g., use of fictional tools,



subjective viewpoint) without the director physically appearing in the film or explicitly intervening in the course of events. Directorial presence is therefore a possibility, but not a necessary component of the genre.

## **New theoretical and methodological approaches**

### **1. Directorial intervention coordinate system**

The dissertation introduces a new analytical model that places documentaries in a two-dimensional coordinate system along the reality-fiction axis and the directorial presence-intervention axis. This novel approach allows for more accurate categorization and analysis of documentaries.

### **2. The spectrum of directorial presence**

The research identifies a five-level spectrum of directorial presence from complete invisibility to central character, which can serve as a useful tool in analyzing documentary making strategies.

### **3. "Reality trust modification"**

The dissertation introduces a new concept following Kirsten Johnson's thoughts: the "reality trust modification," which highlights the interpersonal dimension of the documentary filmmaking process, and refers to the fact that in the documentary making process, the trust relationship between the subject and the director, as well as the common implied behavior (both parties must want the filming), fundamentally influences the presented reality. This approach goes beyond technical or ethical considerations and highlights the interpersonal dimension of documentary.

### **4. Further nuances**

During the research, I also recognized that some of my assumptions were too simplistic or polarizing:

- Instead of the sharp contrast between "creative" and "non-creative" documentary, it is more accurate to think in terms of a continuum where there are different degrees of combining creativity and more traditional approaches.
- Instead of the dichotomy of reality and fiction, it is more productive to talk about the layering and interaction of different "reality layers" (factual, emotional, representational, and constructed reality).
- Instead of categorical classification of films (e.g., observational vs. performative), it is more productive to examine the flexible combination of different filmic tools, strategies, and approaches in individual works.

These realizations prompted me to apply a more differentiated, nuanced approach that better captures the complexity and continuous transformation of contemporary documentary.

## **Conclusions**

The dissertation examines one of the most significant phenomena in contemporary documentary film — the emergence and characteristics of "creative documentary" — through a deliberate methodological approach. I employ an interdisciplinary practice-as-research (PaR) methodology, integrating film theoretical and media studies perspectives with my own directorial practice and decades of professional experience. I have endeavored to establish theoretical frameworks for understanding this phenomenon, analyzing terminological problems, generic definitions, and the process of departure from classical documentary traditions.

The work comprehensively explores the new filmmaking strategies and aesthetic solutions that characterize creative documentary: the deliberate synthesis of fictional and documentarist techniques, various forms of directorial intervention, and the complex relationship between truth and reality.

I also provide a technical-historical overview, from which it becomes clear that the development of documentary film and the phenomenon of "new personality" was driven not only by creative demand, but also by lightweight, filmmaker-facing, arm's-length holdable and manageable sync-sound cameras. All of this therefore served the evolution of directorial

presence as well—a development that today predominantly manifests in mobile phone selfie modes.

I devote particular attention to intentionality and the phenomenon of hybridization — specifically, how boundaries between reality and fiction become blurred and how new narrative techniques emerge. In this context, I address enactive filmmaking and the phenomenon of the imaginary.

The dissertation approaches the subject from a practical perspective, demonstrating different types of directorial presence and the mechanisms of "trust-based modification of reality" through analysis of specific films. Drawing upon my own creative experience and interviews with industry professionals, I examine how documentary filmmaking practices have transformed through telecommunications and technological developments, changes in financing models, and the rise of streaming platforms.

Based on literary precedents, I also point out that creative documentaries offer viewers a new type of "reality contract": this is based not on the promise of objectivity, but on the pursuit for subjective truth and recognition of the creative, authorial perspective. I also raise several contemporary dilemmas — the money compensation of participants, creators' burnout in long-term filming, the importance of follow-up for subjects of the film, and the ethical dimensions of intervention — which could form the basis for future research.

My work's ultimate objective is to systematize and provide a theoretical framework for this paradigm shift, which is significant from a film-historical perspective. The research simultaneously contextualizes the development of Hungarian documentary within an international framework, presenting the challenges and opportunities facing domestic filmmakers.

As a comprehensive result of the research, it can be stated that creative documentary is one of the most dynamically developing areas of contemporary film expression, which has gained significant international recognition in the period between 2004-2024. Creative documentary is not simply a stylistic enrichment of traditional documentary, but a fundamentally new approach that rethinks the possibilities of representing reality, the role of the director, and the ways of involving the viewer.

The significance and legitimacy of creative documentary is also shown by the fact that in the past two decades, more and more such works have won prestigious awards at festivals where previously almost exclusively fictional films were awarded (Cannes, Berlinale, Venice Film Festival). This trend indicates that creative documentary has stepped out of the narrow circle of professional interest and has become a defining part of the broader film culture.

In the dissertation, I conclude that creative documentary is not simply a temporary trend or experiment, but the result of the natural evolution of documentary, which was born as a response to the changed technological, social, and cultural context. The research — in my view — confirms that the boundary between documentary and fiction has indeed blurred, but this does not mean a decrease in the authenticity or value of documentary, but creates the possibility of new forms of expression and the discovery of deeper truths.

The practical significance of the research is that it systematizes and places in a theoretical framework the phenomenon that is already present in the film scene, but whose theoretical processing has been incomplete so far. The dissertation not only describes but also interprets the phenomenon of creative documentary, thus helping both creators and theorists to better understand this film form.

**Keywords:** *creative documentary film, hybrid documentary film, subjectivity, directorial intervention, reality representation, fictionalization, film theory, contemporary documentary filmmaking*

### **Relevant publications** (theoretical side):

Az osztrák beteg – Ulrich Seidl, a provokátor. *Filmvilág*, (2008/11), 16–18.

„Nincsenek morális problémáim” – Beszélgetés Ulrich Seidl-lel. *Filmvilág*, (2008/11), 19–21.

Fuss el véle! – Futófilmek. *Filmvilág*, (2015/10), 27–32.

Gyorsabban, magasabbra, erősebben? – Sportfilmek. *Filmvilág*, (2022/02), 24–28.

A megforduló kamera – Egyszemélyes dokumentumfilmek. *Filmvilág* (2025/10), (in press).

**Relevant films** (practical side):

*Blue Circle* (documentary series) – 2025

*Own Forest* (screenwriter) – 2023

*Margitfilm* – portrait film on Margit Földessy, drama teacher – 2020

*Of Birds and Men* – 2019

*Ultra* – 2017

*Zrínyi and the Wild Boar* – 2017

*Stories in Grey Lights* – portrait film on Imre Benkő, photographer – 2013

*Abducted* – reminiscences of five former child soldiers – 2011

*Uncommon Beats* – portrait film on Gergő Borlai, drummer – 2009

*The Life of a Book Agent* – 2007