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Anonymity and Representation: Everyday Practices of Ethical Documentary Filmmaking

Isobel Blomfield and Caroline Lenette

Abstract: *The five-minute film Mouth of a Shark (Isobel Blomfield, 2018) conveys a young woman’s experiences and precarious situation while she awaits an outcome on her refugee status determination in Australia. Aasiya (pseudonym) lives in community detention. Her interest in creating the film stemmed from her own acknowledgement that she had a platform as a young, literate asylum seeker woman with a “strong” story, and was therefore in a position to portray asylum seekers in a positive light. However, she cannot be identified in the film, even though it depicts her story, due to concerns over safety and her claim for asylum. We use this example to illustrate issues of anonymity and representation, and suggest strategies in line with our commitment to avoid depersonalising tropes in filmmaking. While we are committed to ensuring that people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds exercise agency in filmmaking, protecting Aasiya’s identity had to prevail. We wanted to avoid depersonalising tropes, and instead devised filming strategies that were more respectful of the protagonist and, within the constraint of anonymity, ensured that Aasiya could still represent her story in meaningful ways. We argue for an ethical model that reconciles the need for both anonymity and representation in filmmaking, especially through collaborative editing.*

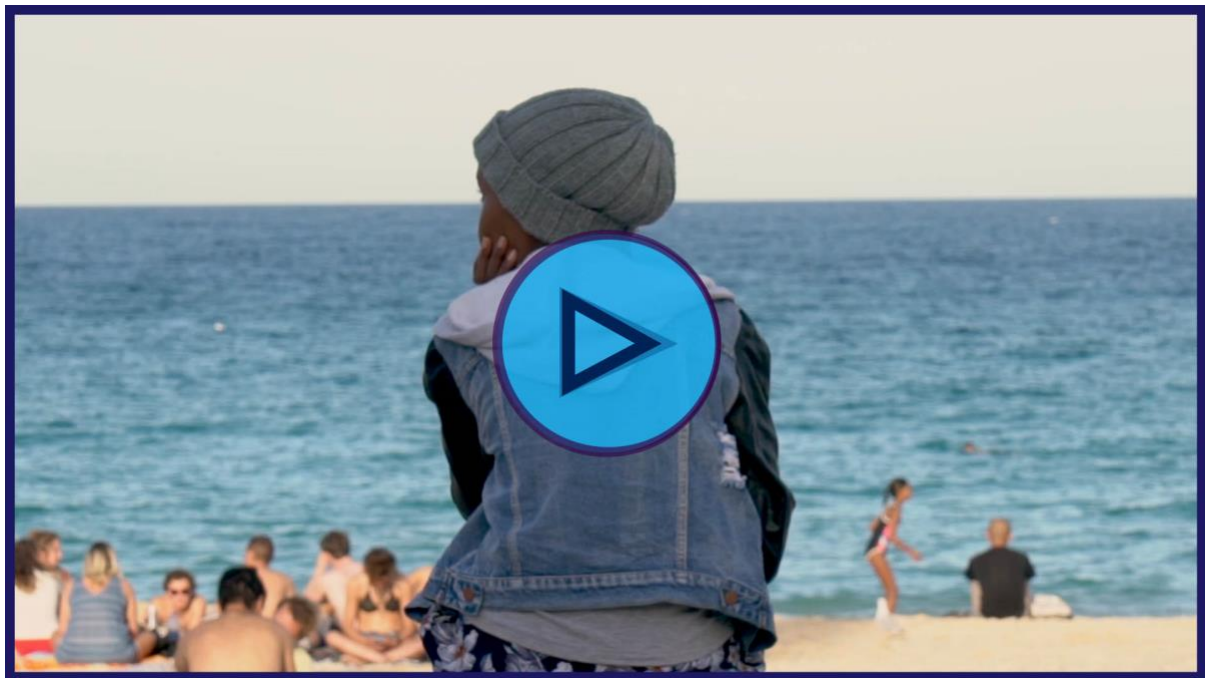


Figure 1: *Mouth of a Shark* (Isobel Blomfield, 2018). Screenshot with link to video.

Introduction

The increasing use of participatory filmmaking with people from refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds in recent times has led us to interrogate cinematic practice with context-specific concerns in mind (Blomfield and Lenette 323). The five-minute film *Mouth of a Shark* (Isobel Blomfield, 2018), which this paper accompanies, is an extract from a longer feature conveying Aasiya's (pseudonym) experiences and precarious situation while she awaits the outcome of her refugee status determination in Australia. We use this example to illustrate our strategies of ensuring anonymity and valuing representation in line with a commitment to avoiding depersonalising tropes in filmmaking. While progressive documentary filmmakers increasingly question the ethics of representation (Blomfield and Lenette; Helff), there is still the persistent issue of a power imbalance between the filmmaker and the participant. This is particularly significant given many social documentaries feature those who have been historically silenced. Documentary filmmakers have an ethical responsibility to ensure that filming does not cause any or more harm to protagonists (Maccarone).

In *Mouth of a Shark*, we favoured two filming strategies that were more respectful of the protagonist and, within the constraint of anonymity, ensured that Aasiya could still represent her story in ways that were meaningful to her and engaging for viewers. We argue for an ethical model in everyday practices of documentary filmmaking that reconciles the need for both anonymity and representation in collaborative projects on forced migration, and that seeks to challenge the invisibility that government policy imposes as a necessity to bring otherwise silenced stories into the consciousness of viewers.

From the outset, we were mindful of questioning whose agenda drove the filming process (Parr). We did not want to add to a long tradition of (mainly observational) filming in refugee studies, rooted in western ethnography and anthropology (Mistry et al.), that favours voyeurism and imposes predetermined sociocultural norms (Rahn). This film project was an unfunded initiative emerging from the friendship between the filmmaker Isobel and Aasiya. The key characteristics of the filming approach were a strong relationship of trust and a commitment to keep editing to a minimum and let the story speak for itself. This was particularly important given that we were working within a sociopolitical context dominated by socially unjust and silencing policies towards people seeking asylum. We adopted an approach similar to the notion of transculturation (Pratt) via filmmaking, whereby people from marginalised groups use processes imposed by dominant cultures to speak back against institutional oppression. This exchange through artistic practice occurs in a "contact zone" as a social space "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 36). In our case, the contact zone was both a site of struggle and a site of joy, where Aasiya could concurrently express her sorrow and exercise agency by creating her own film with Isobel.

Background

In 2015, Isobel met Aasiya when she started visiting Villawood Immigration Detention Centre in Sydney as a volunteer with a group of Australians passionate about supporting asylum seekers who were being indefinitely detained while their protection claims were processed. During her regular visits, Isobel learnt about Aasiya's story over several months, and eventually discussed working together on a film about her experiences. In a previous paper, we wrote about how this strong relationship of trust developed, and the importance of

storytelling and listening with intent (Blomfield and Lenette), especially when all other avenues for extending a sense of welcome and connecting with “mainstream” society had been severed.

Aasiya was released into community detention after twelve months; however, she still lived in limbo as she was not allowed to work and study. This protracted suspension and the lack of autonomy over basic rights can result in a sense of disempowerment or disillusionment (Weston and Lenette). We recognise the power asymmetry between us as scholars in positions of privilege, who can speak and write freely about these issues and create a film in close collaboration with Aasiya, and the protagonist herself, who could not appear on camera due to concerns over safety and her claim for asylum.¹ Aasiya acknowledged, however, that she viewed the relationship with Isobel and the film initiative as a platform for a young, literate asylum seeker woman with a “strong” story that she wanted to share when she was released. Aasiya also became interested in creating the film as a way of portraying asylum seekers in a positive light (Blomfield and Lenette).

The film idea emerged from this established relationship, and a close friendship meant that the filming and editing process was done collaboratively, respectfully and ethically with regards to the intimate, personal nature of the stories shared. In representing Aasiya’s dialogue and the visual imagery in both the filming and editing process, Isobel was particularly cognisant of her role as the artist in helping Aasiya to construct her narrative. A key component of ethics in documentary filmmaking is the relationship between a protagonist and the filmmaker; however, the broader contours of this relationship are often left open for filmmakers to navigate (Winston 252). For *Mouth of a Shark*, the best approach to editing the film was slow and iterative, over numerous months. As Aasiya and Isobel did not live close to each other, they would combine editing sessions with catch-ups over tea, lunch or dinners. While Aasiya did not partake in the technical editing of the film, her feedback and suggestions closely guided the editing phase. Aasiya and Isobel were able to film follow up events and interviews for a nuanced narrative (Blomfield and Lenette). This process of filming and editing a narrative together is not objective; subjective choices and assumptions inevitably arise. As an artist, it is crucial to understand the political context in which the filming takes place, and encourage active collaboration, as explored below.

Challenging Depersonalising Tropes

Alongside our commitment to fostering agency via filmmaking (Parr; Willis et al.), protecting Aasiya’s identity was crucial. We discussed the need to carefully structure the documentary, given its potential as “a semiotic system which generates meaning by the succession of choices between differences [and] the continuous selection of pertinent features” (Nichols 35). According to Khorana, examining portrayals of refugees and asylum seekers on film is important because “in the absence of wider community interactions with recent refugee arrivals, public opinion on refugee-related issues is largely reliant on impressions gleaned from the media” (65). As Sissy Helff outlines in relation to films that are first-person narratives, *Mouth of a Shark* does not show the “telling” of the story. However, it is obvious that the voiceover we hear at the beginning and at the end belongs to Aasiya. This element of “authentic voice” adds to the legitimacy of the story in a sociopolitical context where her very presence has been deemed as illegitimate. By creating and sharing an extract from *Mouth of a Shark*, we aimed to contribute to refugee narratives that differ from the usual “struggle-to-resilience” narrative arc that dominates this field—often depicting a “perfect” life in western countries

(Helff)—which, to a certain extent, has contributed to perpetuating a colonialist-infused approach to filmmaking.

In filmmaking more generally, there are novel digital methods that can be used to preserve anonymity (assuming there are funds to access new technologies) without losing the element of storytelling that is so important for audiences to engage with the narrative. These include strategies such as animation, cartoons (Roe), distorted or unrecognisable images as invented pictures (Helff) or using wooden figurines (for instance, Rithy Panh's *The Missing Picture*, 2013). However, our aim was not to animate or recreate aspects of Aasiya's narrative in this unfunded initiative. Aasiya's intimate story was powerful, and so simple stylistic film choices were favoured to complement, as opposed to overpower, her narrative.

Below, we focus here on two strategies we used to avoid replicating damaging and depersonalising tropes that could disconnect viewers from Aasiya's identity and story, and that are effective means of engaging in the "contact zone" where we become cognisant of other perspectives.

Simplicity

The opening scene at a popular beach—an iconic Australian setting—introduces viewers to Aasiya's story. While we hear her narrate memories of trying times in Somalia, we are drawn to the footage of her sitting on the beach, looking at the ocean, and then walking towards the shore. She cannot be identified as we only see her back, her legs and feet, and close-ups of her eyes. This strategy of filming her at a stunning location where she enjoys the surrounds while we listen to the details of her story gives viewers a chance to sit and walk alongside Aasiya and listen with intent, rather than be disconnected from her story. The beautiful and calm surrounds and soft background music come into sharp contrast with the arduous memories Aasiya shares, and the simplicity of the frames means that viewers can absorb her story rather than turn away due to overwhelming footage and music. This creative tension is similar to what Helff writes with reference to Alpha Bah's film *My Perfect Moment* (2002): "the peaceful and almost romantic picture of the harbour in Bah's movie depicts an intimate facet of a refugee's arrival" (292). This cinematic approach conveyed the protagonist's emotions in a personal visual narrative.

Opportunities to listen with intent and journey alongside protagonists via audiovisual means are crucial, especially in a context dominated by negative connotations and conservative political discourses on asylum seeking (Gale), as well as narrow visual clichés in the media (Lenette and Cleland). Current depictions of refugees and asylum seekers often focus on depersonalising tropes of unidentifiable masses of people fleeing violence, with those depicted, especially women, portrayed as mute, helpless victims (Johnson; Malkki). Allowing space for the audience to simply listen to a personal story, whilst ensuring that protagonists' anonymity is not breached, provides a powerful counternarrative to such negative depictions. This has also been seen in digital storytelling practices with refugee women who were sole parents in Australia, where the audiovisual story creation process was conducive to viewers entering a space alongside the women according to their own memories, interests and hopes (Lenette et al.). Moreover, Aasiya's story does not play into the "perfect life" narrative arc that normally characterises refugee film storyboards (Helff). She simply shares feelings about memories of her family and the difficulty of being so far away from them, while we see, for a brief instant, how she occupies her time.

Collaboration

Whilst the film’s initial narrative focused on Aasiya’s “refugee story”, we continued to film conversations as she enjoyed other, more mundane activities. The process of filming over two years meant that we could capture and reflect a broader understanding of Aasiya’s story and account for individuality, cultural frame of reference, and history, incrementally creating a more holistic and nuanced representation (Kisiara). For example, one scene shows Aasiya cooking *canjero* (traditional flat bread) with another young woman who cooks alongside her while they talk about family and food. The intimate kitchen scene in Aasiya’s house, paired with close-ups of the young women cooking together, draws the viewer into the kitchen space to “partake” in the informal interactions between them. Filming mundane activities while viewers listen to at times challenging stories can emphasise important memories linked to past distress and family.

For Aasiya, the *canjero* scene represents the importance of Somali cooking and the strength of family bonds she shares, captured most simply through an anecdote of her making up stories to keep her brothers out of trouble in Somalia. The act of cooking a traditional dish in a context where she can do little to share culturally significant moments with her family (despite weekly Skype sessions) is reminiscent of processes of cultural continuity, defined here as maintaining and passing on traditional knowledge across contexts (Auger). By her own admission, Aasiya does not cook *canjero* as well as her mother does, but her commitment to reproducing a practice that is deeply connected to her memory of home, even though she is alone in truly understanding its significance, is visible in her “performance” of the practice on film. As such, filming Aasiya over a period of time and giving her space to shape the film’s narrative arc through collaborative editing fostered greater representation beyond preconceived classifications of a “universal refugee story” or depersonalising tropes (Blomfield and Lenette).

Conclusion

Mouth of a Shark offers a fresh approach to tackling the issues at the heart of refugee politics through its first-person account: why so many are forced to leave their country and risk their lives to seek asylum, the limbo of immigration detention, and life as an asylum seeker in Australia. Our wish was to create a movie Aasiya would be proud of—irrespective of the outcome of her refugee status determination—and one that honoured her memories and hopes for the future. Crucially, we thought at length about a filming and editing process that would be respectful of her cultural frame of reference, while also maintaining anonymity and offering a way of resisting the government-imposed necessity for anonymity. We share the simple strategies we used for that purpose so that filmmakers committed to portraying complex experiences can draw from these examples to devise their own ways of addressing issues of anonymity and representation in collaborative, ethical and respectful ways.

Note

¹ The Department of Home Affairs and Aasiya’s lawyers have advised her to avoid speaking to the media, as this could constitute a breach of her community detention conditions. Aasiya has not been granted a substantive visa, which means that disclosing that she has sought asylum

in Australia would place her in a risky situation and increase the likelihood that she will face further harm if returned to Somalia.

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