

Of Sense Of Belonging:  
Creating a documentary film

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## Introduction

How often do we think about those around us? Specifically, people who are less fortunate, who came to this nation, hoping and dreaming for a better life? Often, these immigrants are non-native English speakers, which creates a strong barrier, separating them from the rest of the society, until they can obtain at least a minimal ability to communicate in English language. Even then, most of them would be judged for their inability to coherently speak in full sentences, which leads into even more difficulties on their route to integrate themselves into American Culture. As a society, we rarely truly think about difficulties that many immigrants face upon their arrival to the host nation. It is so interesting and empowering to hear many of their success stories, yet many wish to ignore and brush over difficult early years of immigrants' lives.

In this paper I want to shine the light on the difficulties many immigrants face when coming to the host country, (in this case United States of America); the short- and long-term effect these issues have on individuals as a result of adapting to new culture/society; consequentially having an indirect effect on the remaining family members. By exploring these issues, I will gather the variety of data which I will then use as a focus point in my documentary film project. Using my artist and filmmaker skills, I would like to tackle this issue in form of a proposal.

- *How can I make a documentary film about the difficulties faced by the immigrants as the result of assimilation and sense of belonging?*

## Contextual Discussion

In 2014, a 113-minute documentary film that changed millions of lives was released. Directed by an American documentary film<sup>1</sup> director, Laura Poitras, this film opened the eyes of millions of people on secrets that were never made public before. The power of film, made a strong impact on people all around the world, receiving critical reception, as well as uniting millions of individuals against the injustices of illegal practices of spying and illegally gathering intel on the people of the United States. Constructed from a series of interviews that occur over the period of few days, the film makes a constructive point of view, revealing information bit by bit to the viewer, in the same manner as the “whistleblower” Edward Snowden (shown on the image above), reveals the secret intelligences to the filmmaker. Despite the fact, that the entire film takes place inside the hotel room area, additional visual footage (B-Roll) is used to undertone and depict the information that is being sent through the interviews.



Sudden clues spread over the duration of the film, slow but steady revelations: these techniques keep the viewer’s attention span nearly glued to the screen, evoking the need to see and learn more, as well as to re-watch the film to ensure that everything was understood correctly and no detail’s were missed. Despite being one of the millions of documentary films made in the past hundred years, it was this film, that change my

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<sup>1</sup> *CitizenFour*. Laura Poitras. United States: HBO Films, 2014.

perception of the world, not just from the contextual point, but also from the artistic standpoint. Never have I seen a work of art to have such power over people, while giving the power back to the people with the information provided in it; but it was this moment that allowed me to realize the hidden potential and true strength of documentary filmmaking.

Among the variety of high spectacle fantasy films that draw millions of dollars in its opening days as box office returns, such as Avengers, Star Wars and Avatar to name a few, viewers are left with an emotional satisfaction that lasts for short duration, and slowly fades away, returning viewers mindset from the fantasy world to the real world. On the other hand, documentary films, operate on a completely different spectrum. Often those who wish to watch a documentary film, are expecting to see the reality of the current world, as well as to learn something they were not aware of. Be it a small issue, or life altering event, documentary films are crafted to leave a much large impact on the human's mind, making them more sustainable to learn additional information over the subject matter. The main purpose of documentary film is to document reality as it is, with a main purpose of spreading that knowledge to others. Exactly that was made in a 2015 documentary, Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom.

This documentary<sup>2</sup> shined the light on the events that occurred in Ukraine during the winter of 2013-2014. During that timeframe, millions of Ukrainians protested in the capital square area against the unconstitutional doings, of at the time government. In order to stop the protestors, the ex-president ordered to open fire on its own citizens. With hundreds of dead, and thousands injured, the people of Ukraine fought their way to freedom once again. Effectively forcing the ex-president to run away from the country, in order to avoid justice being served to him for his orders; simultaneously, showing the government that people united can overcome anything, even the fear of death itself. The film was directed by Evgeny Afineevsky; it consists of interviews and large number of found footage from the events of the revolution, that helped to unite Ukrainians against the common foe, their own government. After its initial release, it was shown in other countries' during their own protests. Once again showing the power of documentary film, by inspiring others to stand up to their corrupt leaders

. Being timeless, documentary films provide unique experience to the viewer, something no other film styles are capable of doing. Thus, when it came to create a work of art for my IP project, the only thing that would remain forever, while having an impact on the viewers would be a documentary film. Being an immigrant who came to a different country seeking better life, it was only fitting, that my big project would be an



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<sup>2</sup> *Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom*. Evgeny Afineevsky. Ukraine: Netflix, 2015

exploration of what its like to be an immigrant. After thorough research and variety of small talks with large groups of immigrants I concluded the topic of my IP project to be about the feeling of what its like to belong, the sense of belonging.

### **Research into the topic**

Based on a large number of studies and research made in the past thirty plus years, a strong concept that helps to understand how difficult it is for someone to adapt, as well as how they will behave in the new nation, is a sense of identity. In the case of immigrants, it referred as a “sense of belonging”, an active sense of being a part of a social group or a place (either physical or imaginary)<sup>3</sup>. The need to belong, is considered to be an important motivator responsible for many emotional and cognitive choices of the individuals. If possible, many immigrants would either travel with their family, or try and build family in the host country. Corelating back to the sense of belonging, “home is where your family is”<sup>4</sup>. However according to Sandra Sigmon from a journal article written in the early 2002,

“A psychological home can be defined as a sense of belonging in which self-identity is tied to a particular place. It is a dynamic process continually negotiated thought a person’s lifespan. “Home” is thus defined as an imaginary or desired locus of belief and yearning, a space that may carry – spiritual, as in religion or self-believes; emotional, relating to current or future family members or close friends; as well as nationalist and patriotic connotations.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Black, Richard. “Conceptions of ‘home’ and the political geography of refugee repatriation.” *Applied Geography*, 22 (2). (2002) 123-138. ISSN 0143-6228

<sup>4</sup> Kohan, Jenji (2014)

<sup>5</sup> Sigmon, Sandra. *Psychological Sense of Community*. New York: Springer US, 2002. 24-41

Furthermore, it appears that among exceptionally skilled immigrants who leave their home country in search for better quality of life, the sense of belonging plays even stronger role; as if the satisfaction is not reached by certain time frame (different for each individual) they appear to be most likely to lean the host country and return back home, or immigrate elsewhere. Based on the studies that focused on determining the role of life satisfaction as a major factor linked to general well-being and determination of eventual success, the life satisfaction was found to have strong correlation to “subjective and objective variables, of which more than 80% are at the individual level”.<sup>6</sup> Education and standard of living are the general guidelines that firmly explain life satisfaction in terms of objective parameters. While subjective variables would be classified as level of income and social acceptance, as well as religious and cultural affiliations. As the result we find strong connection with immigrants’ life satisfaction and well-being having an important role in integration process as well as the developing sense of belonging.

Arriving to a new country is certainly costly, especially for those who come from 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries with family. Often the lack of English proficiency results in many taking on lower paid and/or more risky jobs. Based on the same research, those who are not willing to work at high risk factor jobs, would typically take on much lower paid jobs, working from 8 to 12 hours a day, resulting in 70-80 hours a week. While this can have heavy toll on both mental and physical health of an individual, surprisingly in

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<sup>6</sup> Bonini, Astra. “Cross-national variation in individual life satisfaction: Effects of national wealth, human development, and environment conditions.” *Social Indicators Research*. 2008: 87

immigrant families, this also has considerably negative effect on young children, ages 4 to 18.<sup>7</sup>

## **Methodology**

Based on the variety of research that I was able to find; I made an early decision to dive deep in the work and start conducting interviews, search for possible participants in my projects as well as dive head first into recording one on one sit down conversations with immigrants, who were willing to partake in this project. Initially, I was going to conduct the interviews and hope to find common issues that many immigrants faced in their past, however, quickly the reality kicked in. Despite the initial anticipations, the audio documentation revealed that many of the researched issues do not truly appear in real life, among those who I have pre-interviewed. On the other hand, I discovered a strong connection in the issue of sense of belonging and difficulty of language comprehension directly correlating with each other in nearly all of the pre questioned cases.

Just like Kirby Dick said in his CBC News: The National interview, before doing the documentary film, one must first gather as much background knowledge on the specific topic, and then dive deep into to it, gather any information that comes around, and let the film take its own flow.<sup>8</sup> Only after I stepped aside and looked back at the project with a wider lens, I concluded that I was approaching my documentary from the wrong perspective. I made sure to take a short break to revise my main focus of the work and synthesized a much narrow topic of discussion. After few sessions of peer feedback

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<sup>7</sup> Jackson, Susan. "After-Effects of Job-Related Stress: Families as Victims." *Journal of Occupational Behaviour* 3, no. 1 1982: 63-77

<sup>8</sup> CBC News. "Interview with filmmaker Kirby Dick." *CBC News. The National*, March 6, 2015.



and critiques, both from my classmates as well as outside sources, I concluded that the main topic of my documentary film would be “Sense of Belonging, and Assimilation in the Host Country.”

Upon starting almost anew, I went back to talk to those participants that I worked originally with, to possibly re-shoot the interviews; this time in much more calm manner, following the one main question and then exploring different path along the way. Unlike the original interviews that took more than 3 hours a piece, this time, they were simple, much more relaxed, person to person chats with the camera sitting next to me. At the end, the interview parts took no longer than 60 minutes, however I ended up spending more time with the interviewees, which allowed me to get to know and care about those individuals even more. Additionally, while spending time with them, I was able to focus on filming “b-roll” footage whenever possible.

The implementation of the “B-Roll” was a big change in my project. While the interviews that were filmed seemed to be appealing, the b-roll footage allowed me to truly shape this project into a high-quality documentary film, that I have originally envisioned it to be. Whenever I had a talking head, and wanted to emphasize more importance on the information that is being conveyed, the b-roll footage would come in, visually showing additional information, enriching the film, and making it much more stronger and appealing to watch. Every two weeks, I would edit and create segments of my film, have it up for critique and feedback, fix any issues while simultaneously moving forward with the film. Often the little things here and there, such as discrepancy in color, or audio being not clear would be pointed out by the reviewers, and thanks to those important feedbacks, I would quickly fix and change them to ensure that the film works and flows well.

## Creative Work

While working on the film, I realized the importance of constant feedback. Time after time, I would add more and more content, have it reviewed and criticized. Then I would take that and fix/adjust in the next



iteration. At first the film was meant to be close to 30 minutes, then I aimed at 24, and finally ended up around 16. Half the time of original ideation, thrice as powerful in the



meaning and message that is being sent through the work. Three strangers, different countries, variety of age groups, all united by being just that, immigrants that now sincerely belong in the country

they live in.

While working on the film, these people I interviewed became more than just participants, they became my friends. I started to understand the importance of transitioning and intertwining the stories of these individuals. Additionally, from the technical perspective, I learned about the importance of color correction, making sure that when transitioning from one scene to another, it feels as smooth and natural as possible. With footages being recorded in different settings through various time periods, the biggest challenge for me was to make this film flow as natural as possible. While each scene was shot with different room temperatures and colors, I ended up spending large amount of time, on aligning the colors so they do not interrupt the flow of the film.

Music ended up playing an important role in establishing strong beginning of the film, as well as signaling the ending of it. Originally, the music was mean to be composed by yet another immigrant musician, with whom I made prior arrangements to create an original score for the film, but due to unforeseen COVID-19 situation, the film ended up lacking that fragment, and instead was replaced by a song writing by another immigrant, that I have come across while looking for musical compositions on the internet.

Talking about the Coronavirus of 2020, it had unforeseen impact on the final product that I created. Due to the stay at home regulation, majority of the fragments of b-roll, ended up being a found footage from popular video sharing websites such as YouTube and StoryBlocks. As mentioned earlier, the final score had to be substituted by a work of different musician, which certainly had an unexpected impact on the tone of the film, since original score was my top priority. Most of the additional footage that was planned to be recorder during the months of March and April, of course was not shot, and thus had to be replaced and/or worked around. While I wished this film would be fully filmed by me, the substitution of fragments filmed by others was integral in order to finish the film and produce it in a high-quality format as I have originally envisioned it to be.

## **Conclusion**

One year ago, an idea of personal full feature documentary film seemed impossible to me, today, that film is complete and is being showcased in a senior's exhibition of Stamps graduating students of 2020. While working on this grandiose project, there were many obstacles I had to overcome before this film would be properly

completed. Time management, production quality, constant multi camera controls, lighting and color, audio and most importantly self-confidence in order to get out there, into the unknown and start filming.

The documentary consists of personal stories told by three individuals coming from different countries and of varied age groups. Such approach, forced me to get out of my personal bubble, get out there in the field, make large amount of pre interviews, constantly communicate, and make connections with complete strangers. A skill that no class can teach, yet so important in the life of an artist, moreover, a filmmaker. Over the past two semesters, I have grown a much larger appreciation of art, discovering how much work and time and effort is constantly being put into these small-scale projects. Simultaneously, I have grown to even further understand and appreciate art from a vastly different point of view. At the end, I have become someone I always wanted to be – a creator.

## Reference Page

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