

On Academic Filmmaking as a “Messy” Methodology

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Abstract

How would you make a documentary, stranded in your house, in the middle of a global pandemic? What happens to your project, and what happens to the filmmaker-researcher?

On the eve of the global Covid-19 pandemic, I returned from Melbourne to Istanbul to begin filming the documentary which is the practical side of my Ph.D. project on the filmmaking methodologies of contemporary female filmmakers from Turkey. When the outbreak of the pandemic locked the world inside their houses, I turned *my* house into a studio and started using things I found in the house as my equipment, such as the projector, phones, and books as tripods. My friend turned into a cinematographer, and we learned how to use a 4K video recorder from YouTube tutorials. We filmed the live interviews with the female filmmakers that took place over Skype. The film ended up reflecting the experience of making a film under the pandemic conditions. In this article, I will attempt to think through my filmmaking process and understand “mess” as an experimental approach that works even in an academic context.

Keywords: Academic Filmmaking, *Dream Workers*, Messy Methodology, Unmet Possibility, Coincidentiality

Mess: A Rebellious Methodology

Modern-day academy is demanding. It demands timely submissions, meeting deadlines, keeping up with schedules, and making thorough plans. It necessitates the academics to follow a pre-determined, tangible path leading them directly to the gaps that are supposed to be filled by the expected outcomes. But being a filmmaker/scholar and deriving knowledge from the filmmaking practice challenges these academic assumptions because the unpredictability of artistic practice and the coincidentalness of documentary-making process may turn the process into a “mess.” And the knowledge produced through an artistic practice can be born out of this mess. Knowledge might not come from a smooth, white, predictable path but from a life-like process. Often complex, painful, and playful... That is why in this article, I aim to think about how these two terms, academy and filmmaking, function together. How do the demands of the academy get along with the unpredictability of artistic practice? And how does bringing knowledge to life out of such a “messy” process pose a challenge to the traditions of the academy?

I would like to think about these questions through my “messy” Ph.D. story. Using documentary filmmaking as my main mode of inquiry, I designed a creative practice-based doctoral project. Within this project, my aim was to understand the filmmaking methodologies of contemporary female filmmakers from Turkey. I chose to work on this topic because, for the first time in the history of cinema, Turkey witnesses a generation of female directors who create a distinct cinema with feminist aesthetics and concerns despite misogynistic cultural and social dynamics and authoritarianism. To explore women’s film culture in Turkey, I wrote an exegesis and produced a feature-length documentary film *Dream Workers* (Fontini 2022). In the written part of my research, I identified the new production methods and stylistic approaches used by contemporary female directors from Turkey in relation to sociopolitical and cultural dynamics and theorised these features under the term “Women’s New Cinema.” The exegesis discusses the particularities of Women’s New Cinema through the filmmaking practices of seven directors who were interviewed for the documentary film

Dream Workers. Choosing documentary as the methodology enabled the research to reflect the narratives and experiences of featured directors in their own voices. In producing the documentary, I also became one of the filmmakers who contributed to women’s film culture. The exegesis also examines this reflexivity by discussing my own filmmaking experience.

Using lived experiences to build theoretical discussions of a Ph.D. project was a decision to follow an unusual path. This approach contradicts the “intellectual tradition” which assumes that “something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life” (Ahmed 2017, 10). Rather than pulling theory away from life, my research aimed to bring theory “closer to skin” (ibid.). While conceptualising this in my Ph.D. exegesis, the work of Sara Ahmed and Katherine McKittrick was useful. Not only do they suggest that “the personal is theoretical” (ibid.) but they also define “story” as “theoretical” (McKittrick 2021, 8). The Black ways of knowing (2021, 3) enabled me to formulate a rationale that understands “imagination” as “necessary to analytical curiosity and study” (2021, 8). By constructing academic knowledge from stories narrated in the documentary, my doctoral project intervened in the traditional academic expectation.

Placing “personal” story at the core of my research, I also wanted to challenge the idea that when it is *his* story, it easily becomes History but when it is *our* story, i.e., queers, women, Blacks, Muslims, etc., it always stays as a personal story. I aimed to contribute to history through our “personal” stories. Remaining “agnostic”, trusting the “journey”, and constructing the “academic” knowledge from the resonances of the personal stories that are shared by the participants might have ended up with “messy” consequences. As Tim Bond and Dione Mifsud say:

[W]ho decides what may be disclosed about whom? What is restricted information and only disclosed outside the formal exchange, as it were off the record? These are fa-



Figure 1: The poster of *Dream Workers*

miliar problems in any qualitative research. However the nature of the narrative process means that concerns of this type may be difficult to anticipate in advance and may only become issues as they arise. (2006, 250)

By acknowledging the unpredictability of a filmmaking process, I opened the research to *possibility* rather than fixing it with predetermined outcomes. Adopting this rebellious approach, I accepted “mess” as a scientifically creative methodology.

Experience the Experience of Making a Film

Before the production process started, I was thinking mess as an intellectually non-traditional way of making a film. Similar to the Black method (McKittrick 2021, 5) which demands “openness,” I formulated this innovative approach as “unsatisfied with questions that result in descriptive-data-induced answers” (ibid.). But during the production process, I understood that mess is not only an analytical frame but also how one chooses to live life. As well as being a way of knowing, it is a livingness that is sustained by the erotic (see Lorde 1984), wonder (see McKittrick 2021, 6), and coincidence. Mess is not an untidy, confused state but a “profoundly creative source” (Lorde 1984, 91), a “desire to know” (McKittrick 2021, 5) and a detailed curiosity open to the unmet possibility and surprise. I would like to explain these observations through my production story which also tells how “mess as methodology” on paper became my way of living life.

In early 2020, I returned from Melbourne to Istanbul to start filming the documentary production. My initial plan for the production of the documentary was to record the interviews with the contemporary female directors at the Atlas Theatre in Istanbul and travel in Turkey to visit locations of the films made by the female filmmakers. However, the Cultural Ministry decided to close Atlas Theatre down to open a new theatre there. Welcoming this coincidence into the documentary, I decided to film the about-to-be-gentrified Atlas Theatre. I wanted to depict how my filmmaking process was affected by the cultural politics of the current government even before the production started. I started filming the closure of the theatre while searching for an alternative place for the interviews. That was when the pandemic broke out.

The lockdowns followed the outbreak of the pandemic shortly after, forcing me to reconsider my production methods again. Not being allowed to go out, I turned my house into a studio so that I could record Skype interviews between myself and the participants. In preparation for the production, the cinematographer Nalan Abbasoğlu and I arranged new equipment such as a projector, phones, tripods, and a gimble. We learned how to use Filmic Pro, a 4K video recorder for mobile phones. After many trials at home, we decided on how to best position the lights and phones to film the interviews. As the phones were recording for trial purposes, I ended up having footage showing the pre-production stage. These recordings have since become a part of the final documentary *Dream Workers*. This is how the documentary started thriving: by remaining agnostic and trusting the journey. Out of a “personal” and “messy” process, the academic knowledge started to emerge.



Figure 2: Arranging the lighting in my house, image from *Dream Workers*



Figure 3: Arranging the living room for the interviews, image from *Dream Workers*

The unpredictability of the filmmaking process took me out of the “normal,” expected, arranged ways of production. The instability of the filmmaking process led the crew and I to find alternative ways to make a film. The live interviews did not take place in person but over Skype. They were projected onto a wall through a projector which was then recorded by the cinematographer. While recording the interviews, I was trapped in the house because of the constant curfews. But I continued making the film. I filmed myself stranded in the house, spending my days under the curfew. Instead of pushing rigid plans to find answers to my research questions, I

decided to experience the process. Rather than expecting the “right” things to happen, I started approaching the process with curiosity and wonder. I ended up making a film that not only narrates the stories of women filmmakers from Turkey, but which also depicts how a contemporary female director from Turkey (me) makes her film under the misogynistic social and political atmosphere and pandemic conditions.

Involving the filmmaking process in the documentary was not part of the initial plan. However, I ended up involving the story of the filmmaking process and my personal story. During the post-production stage, I watched the footage in which I was having intimate conversations with the female filmmaker participants and cinematographer. I watched all of us sharing many details related to our personal and professional lives. It was during this phase of production that my questioning started: “Should I also include my story?”, “Do I feel safe enough to unfold my unhappy childhood and my reflections about myself within the documentary?” But how could I present all the personal and quite sincere stories told by the participants, and hide my own story? As argued by Michael Renov, the subjective is “the filter through which the Real enters discourse” (1999, 88). That is why I decided my reality should enter the film; by sharing details of my life and being vulnerable, I claimed my own voice, gave up the power I was holding as the filmmaker, and became more equal to the participating filmmakers.

Involving the subjective or being reflexive is not a new approach to documentary filmmaking. Filmmakers started including autobiographical details in the film and making first-person documentaries in the 1970s and 80s. In alignment with the cultural climate of the period in the West, “a range of ‘personal’ issues—namely, race, sexuality, and ethnicity—became consciously politicised” (Renov 1999, 89). In response to this, documentary-makers started enacting their “fluid, multiple, even contradictory” identities within their films (1999, 90, 91). Female filmmakers such as Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, Alina Marazzi and Margot Nash are a few examples revealing what it means to be an embodied and perceiving person within their documentaries. However, my journey was slightly different from these filmmakers. It was not part of the initial plan but due to the unpredictability of the filmmaking process, I ended up

sharing my personal story with the audience. It was the coincidental-ity and limitations that triggered my creativity.

Limitation as a Creative Strategy

During the editing stage, I entered a new messy phase which led me toward more possibilities and surprising collaborations. I was planning to use the facilities of the university to edit the documentary but as Australia implemented strict border policies during the pandemic, I got stranded in Turkey for two years. So, the little budget I had was mostly spent on the editing of the documentary. Whilst these financial limitations shaped my production process, we worked in solidarity. Being aware of my financial limitations, Nalan Abbasoğlu the cinematographer, and Angie Black the post-production supervisor volunteered their time working on the project. Participants gave consent for me to use the interviews and parts of their films in the documentary and for promotional activities foregoing copyright fees. I met Sertaç Toksöz and Yalın Özgencil, the owners of Postbıyık (an Istanbul post-production company), who also applied colour correction and sound design to *Dream Workers*. They provided the film with post-production support.

Little by little, the scenes started coming together. However, the initial feedback I received on an early cut of *Dream Workers* suggested depicting a “certain” type of female existence that represents typical Eastern femininity. As a scholar working on an Eastern context at a Western institution, I was aware of such expectations. It was my conscious choice not to create a victim or a hero or a “heroic victim” (see Winston 2009, 46) out of the women from Turkey. In *Dream Workers*, the viewer watches “ordinary” conversations between filmmakers, all of whom come from the same world. Telling the stories of women artists producing under an authoritarian regime in my Ph.D. film, I was sensitive not to produce victimised Eastern femininity for the consumption of a Western audience. As “Islamic women of the Middle East are typically seen as victims of religion, patriarchy, tradition, and poverty in the West, women artists from the same region are expected to testify to this presumed condition” (Amireh and Majaj quoted in Suner 2007, 65–66). I was careful not to create binaries such as us / them, gender liberated / enslaved, developed / underdeveloped, civilised / primitive.

In her brilliant work, *Kill the Documentary*, Jill Godmilow talks about this division in a detailed way. If the person depicted is “commodified, circulated, and consumed without regard to its original status as a person”, Godmilow calls it “pornography of the real” (2022, 1). The film’s aim in this instance is “to entertain its audience; to produce fascination with its materials; to achieve closure; to satisfy, and to assure the audience of informed and moral citizenship” (2022, 3). But there is another way of filmmaking awakening us from this hegemonic way of thinking. Jill Godmilow explores this alternative filmmaking mode through the notion of “speaking nearby” developed by Trinh T. Minh-ha:

[Speaking nearby] requires that you deliberately suspend meaning, preventing it from merely closing and hence leaving a gap in the formation process. This allows the other person to come in and fill that space as they wish. Such an approach gives freedom to both sides and this may account for it being taken up by filmmakers who recognize in it a strong ethical stance. By not trying to assume a position of authority in relation to the other, you are actually freeing yourself from the endless criteria generated with such an all-knowing claim and its hierarchies in knowledge. (2018)

This approach promotes a more equal mode of engagement, offering an equal space where the director avoids naming, inspecting, and defining— she just watches and records (Godmilow 2022, 95). Not only the production but also the editing process of *Dream Workers* made me come back to Minh-ha’s “gap.” And here comes another part of my messy production story. During the editing process, I worked with two different editors but we were unable to work together due to the constant curfews. What I was imagining in my mind was manifesting itself in their rough cut as “the pornography of reality.” The editors were sending me the footage that was trying so hard to elevate the emotions of the audience. The edited scenes depicted how dramatic the situation of women in Turkey is under the male-dominated sociocultural order. After being unable to work with either of them, I ended up becoming the editor of *Dream Workers*. While editing it, I tried to avoid making an “us-watching-them”

documentary in which the audience watches ethnographically interesting subjects. Leading an “anti-academic” filmmaking process, I was determined *not* to produce knowable Eastern womanhood for the consumption of the audience.

I did it by ensuring the participants’ involvement in the editing process which allowed them to come in and fill the “gap” as they wished. I tried to capture the actualities of the filmmakers by interviewing them but images can still be selected and manipulated in the editing stage (Winston 2009, 15). As mentioned by Bill Nichols, in the encounter between the director and the participant, something is at risk (2017, 112). The filmmaker entering the world of its participants “has the power to alter [that] world” (2017, 112). That is why I decided to involve the filmmakers in every stage of meaning production: I wanted us to “create” the “actuality” together. The participant filmmakers watched the intended-edited versions of the documentary, which part of the interviews should be included was negotiated and their input shaped the final film’s structure and meaning. This promoted their agency and foregrounded our relationship as a site of “negotiated power” (see Walker and Waldman 1999, 13-19). After we all agreed on the final version, I locked the picture and the post-production stage started. This gave the participants power over their representation which moved the research from traditional ethnographic objectivity to an “informed intersubjectivity” stemming from listening and collaboration (McBeth 1993, 146, 161).

Dream Workers, an Experiential Journey

The pursuit of making *Dream Workers* during a global pandemic allowed the rhythm of life and experience to create the narrative. I had to follow an unknown path and experience the flow of the film as I was unable to follow the decisions made during the pre-production stage. The messy process might have made me end up with messy consequences, but a couple of months after its completion, *Dream Workers* screened at the 29th International Adana Golden Boll Film Festival (2022) and the 15th Documentarist “Which Human Rights?” Film Festival (2022).



Figure 4: *Dream Workers* at 29th International Adana Golden Boll Film Festival



Figure 5: 15th Documentarist Film Festival. The cinematographer Nalan Abbasoğlu and I answer the questions from the audience

Days before the screening of the film, I started worrying about how the narrative would be understood. I was preoccupied with being “misunderstood.” It was an academic anxiety; I was still expecting the audience to understand the “right” things. Several months after experiencing the screening stage, I understand one thing better: the meaning of the film does not only depend on the director and her intentions but also on the experience of the audience. As noted by Jacques Rancière, “Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity” (2009, 17). As spectators link what they see to what they have seen, said, done and dreamed (ibid.), they might understand things the director does not intend them to or they might not understand the things she wants them to. In this sense, being “misunderstood” is a part of the process. Misunderstanding some things might even be better than understanding the “right” things.

Expecting the audience to understand the right things separates them “from both the capacity to know and the power to act” (Rancière 2009, 2). This is an academic concern: to give the right answer, to tell the audience what to think, and how to feel. In this understanding, the director makes a film to teach the audience, to activate them, to “wake them up” from a dream, and to “save” them from the world of fantasy. In this story, knowledge flows from the director to the audience, from the one who knows to the one who is expected to learn –this is a “logic of straight, uniform transmission” (Rancière 2009, 14). However, a story only finds its meaning upon meeting another story (2009, 22). Just like the artist, the spectator selects, compares, and acts by interpreting. She relates what she sees to other things she sees in other scenes, in other places. She cre-

ates her own poem with the letters of the poem standing in front of her (2009, 13).

Now it is clear to me that filmmaking is not one-way communication from the filmmaker to the audience, it is not like a scholar lecturing her students in silence. It is a sharing. Sharing disrupts the contemporary principles of knowledge production. It is “capacious” and “crosses boundaries” (McKittrick quoted in Keith 2023, 1). It disrupts the hierarchical structure built by “giving and receiving” which reproduces the neoliberal values of the institution. Producing knowledge out of an artistic production, in this sense, is an intervention.

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