

**THE MAKING OF SEEKING THE SULTAN**  
A SELF-REFLEXIVE, AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL  
DOCUMENTARY

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## **INTRODUCTION**

There is an image I have carried in my mind since primary school of the heir to the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire as an old man. It was from a black and white photo taken of him in exile, staring towards the horizon. While I cannot recall the caption, I knew enough about history then to understand that he had been expelled from my country. The image was so powerful that it has remained with me since then. As a newcomer to the United States, struggling to adapt, I found myself recalling this vivid image and my childhood concerns for the Ottomans, the ex-ruling family of Turkey that was forcibly expelled from my country in 1924. From these memories, stimulated by my new situation, the idea for this documentary was born. Aware that most Americans know little of the history or geography of Turkey, I thought it might be valuable to share with others my attempt to learn what happened to this family through the medium of video.

In the beginning of shooting the video, I did not realize that there might be a connection between my desire to seek out the Ottomans and my own attempts to establish identity in a new culture. I now realize that when a person leaves their homeland they have to face numerous challenges that offer them opportunities for personal growth. Thus, in some ways the film became a personal story about what I could learn from someone else from my country who also had to adapt to moving but under much more difficult and emotional circumstances than myself.

I was sure that video would be a good medium for me to share my story with others, but I needed to find a style that would be honest and appealing. This thesis is largely focused on this question. It begins by placing my chosen style of video within the major schools of documentary film. It then proceeds to discuss the specific production decisions that I had to make. This is followed by a discussion of the personal, political implications of making a video about the family that were the imperial rulers of my country and how I tried to deal with this. Finally, I discuss the challenge of finding an appropriate ending for the documentary. I could not anticipate the ending because I had little idea of what had happened to the Ottoman family and whether any of them were living in the USA. In the course of my searching and shooting, I had the extremely good fortune of finding the man who would have been the head of the empire. He was not bitter, angry or living in poverty, so I could not end the film in any obviously dramatic way. In fact, the Sultan turned out to be a very pleasant and open-minded man so I still had to find an ending to the story that would not be an anticlimactic.

## **THE CHOICE OF A SELF-REFLEXIVE, AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DOCUMENTARY STYLE FOR THIS PROJECT**

Most documentaries have a viewer and a subject and most discussions of documentary deal with this relationship. But it became clear early in my thinking that I needed to include my own explorations of the topic in the documentary. Like most people who grew up in Turkey, I did not know what happened to the Ottoman family after their exile and I had no clear perspective on them. I did know that I had felt empathy for them as a

child and that now that I was struggling to adapt to living outside of my country, these concerns about them as exiles were being rekindled. It therefore seemed that the most honest approach to this subject was for me to be a part of the video, with my dreams, investigations, reflections and doubts exposed. To make a traditional documentary film of the history of the Ottoman family and an account of their current lives would have resulted in a one-dimensional account of history. It would not have captured the potentially interesting dimension of how the identity of a historical figure had impacted the feelings and identity of a developing child and might now have some impact on an adult who finds herself missing her homeland.

The idea of making a documentary with the filmmaker in the film is not a new one. The "Man with a Movie camera" by Dziga Vertov in 1929 may be the first one. The adoption of this self-reflexive style was part of the long struggle by documentary filmmakers to find a way of being honest with the viewer about what is presented to them by sharing with them the process of making the film and the struggle to represent the world:

To be reflexive is to structure a product in such a way that the audience assumes that the producer, the process of making, and the product are a coherent whole. Not only is an audience made aware of these relationships, but it is made to realize the necessity of that knowledge. To be more formal about it, I would argue that being reflexive means that the producer deliberately and intentionally reveals to his audience the underlying epistemological assumptions that caused him to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, and finally to present his findings in a particular way.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ruby, Jay "The Image Mirrored." In New Challenges for Documentary. California, University of California, 1988. p.65

This rationale for reflective films seemed appropriate to my goals. I found a number of films of this genre to be useful to my developing ideas. For example, Michael Rubbo's "Waiting for Fidel"(1974) and his follower, Nick Broomfield's "Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam" (1995) were both searching for a person or trying to find an answer to a question. They did this by letting the audience see the efforts of the filmmaker and crew and by showing the backstage camera work. In Rubbo's reflexive documentary "Waiting for Fidel" the filmmaker goes to Cuba for an interview with Fidel Castro, who never shows up for the interview. In the end, Rubbo returns home at least having some footage taken while he was waiting for Castro. I knew from this model that if I were unable to reach anybody from the Ottoman family at least I would have footage about the process of searching for it and that might be interesting enough.

While there is a reference to my childhood thoughts, this video needed to be more than just autobiographical. I follow Ruby in making the distinctions between "autobiography" and "reflexivity" in film:

In an *autobiographical* work, while the producer - the self- is the center of the work, he can be unselfconscious in his presentation. The author clearly has had to be self-aware in the process of making the product (i.e., the autobiography), but it is possible for him to keep that knowledge private and simply follow the established conventions of that genre. To be reflexive is not only to be self-aware, but to be sufficiently self-aware to know what aspects of self are necessary to reveal so that an audience is able to understand both the process employed and the resultant product and to know that the revelation itself is purposive, intentional, and not merely narcissistic or accidentally revealing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.p.66

I had an old childhood struggle to resolve: the love of my country and history of the new Republic of Turkey and my empathy for an exiled family. The autobiographical part could only be interesting if I shared with the viewer the process of my attempts to resolve this struggle. Otherwise the video would only be a static piece about unresolved childhood feelings.

## **SPECIFIC DECISIONS REGARDING PRODUCTION**

### ***The Decision to Structure the Documentary Chronologically***

The decision was taken to shoot and edit the story in the same sequence as the story naturally unfolded for the documentary filmmaker, myself. In this respect, it followed the logic of the directors of cinema verite. Of course there was a fundamental difference from most cinema verite in that I was both partially the subject of the video and the director! Nevertheless, I took the decision to have my cameraman or myself turn on the camera whenever I was in pursuit of my quest and to film what happened in sound-synch. Furthermore, I decided not to alter this sequence of shots in the process of editing the video. It was, however, necessary on one occasion to create a shot after the fact. I realized that my standard library shots of maps of Turkey were not sufficiently engaging and were not appropriate to my chosen style of presenting a personal view of history. I therefore created shots of myself drawing maps of the Ottoman Empire and inserted them where the static atlas maps had been. This modification did not seem to be a serious departure from the rule that I had set for myself.

In order to further convince my viewers of the verite of my search, I also decided to videotape my telephone calls in pursuit of the Ottoman family and the Sultan. Because the time period for this series of phone conversations took weeks, I decided to show the chronological changes through the changing colors of a maple tree in my garden. Still, I feared that the telephone calls would result in a boring story at times. But preliminary informal screenings of the video indicated that the audience found these phone calls to be an effective way of engaging them in my struggle, so I kept them.

### ***The Decision not to Focus on the Filmmaking Struggle***

This documentary places the filmmaker on screen not as a participant observer as in many other reflexive documentaries, but like Rubbo's films, as the director/protagonist trying to answer some questions and to share with the viewer the process of trying to answer them. Unlike some reflexive documentaries, this video intentionally avoids a focus on the material conditions or the process of the shooting. I wanted this emphasis to lead to a dialogue with the viewer, over the interpenetrating issues of history, autobiography and cultural identity.

### ***The Choice of a Reflexive and Dialogic Style of Narration***

I tried to follow as much as possible the principle of documentary narration described by David Maysles:

Ideally, part of our purpose is to make the viewers their own commentators. Not to tell anything but to show. Narration is only a leg that you use for support if you need it. It picks up something that isn't in the picture that you missed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Macdonald, Kevin, Cousins. Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of the Documentary. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996. p.263

There was however, a need for some traditional form of narration because of the historical aspects of the video there . But gradually, through the use of visual devices, I was able to reduce the amount of narration. I also found ways of making the narration more conversational with the audience, about my own attempts to understand things, rather than making speeches. I tried to create a dialogue, sometimes asking questions rather than spelling out ideas. This is similar to the style of Michael Rubbo, as described by Alan Rosenthal:

...the voice is not the usual voice of authority. Instead Rubbo's voice gives vent to feelings, impressions, doubts, musings. It is a voice that raises questions and involves the viewer in the answers - a voice open to dialogue.<sup>4</sup>

I also learned from this experience that silence can sometimes be effective too!

### ***The Challenge of Incorporating Historical Information***

I had been confused as a child about why there had been such a complete lack of information about the Ottomans. I had later learned that this was a necessary move by the government of the new Turkish republic as a way of stressing that there would be no retreat from the radical creation of the new democratic nation. But still I felt that there was something to be gained by my tracing these missing pages from my school history books. The Ottoman families that we had learned so much about from their glory days had just evaporated. Surely the members of these families had some stories to tell too? As I put it to Zeynep Osman, the wife of Ertugrul Osman (the head of the Ottoman

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<sup>4</sup> Rosenthal, Alan. The Documentary Conscience. USA: University of California. 1980.p. 232.

family who would have been the Sultan), in my first phone conversation with her: “ I’m not interested in the cold facts of history, I’m interested in the human side of the story”. It was not that I doubted the history of the foundation of the new Republic of Turkey that I had been taught as a child, but just that it had felt like there were more stories to be told. I wanted my documentary to help a little with this process. But first I needed to introduce the audience to some of the historical background to Turkey and its location in the world because this part of the world is known very little by most people in the US. I introduce the audience to this issue of lack of knowledge and a tendency to stereotype by including in the documentary a clip of the comments of one of my cameramen. He explains during the car journey to Osman Effendi’s home that he gained his stereotypical images of Turkey from cartoons.

I needed to find a way to introduce the audience to some of the basic geographical and historical information, but to do so in a way that was in keeping with the self-reflexive style of the documentary. As a way of stressing that this video was a personal attempt to make sense of history, I decided to show myself drawing maps of my country and the historical changes in the Ottoman Empire rather than presenting static maps from an atlas. I further employed this principal in my reading of historical texts, paintings and photographs. I showed these sources not as abstract historical facts but as another set of resources in my own process of making personal sense of history.

## ***The Employment of Visual Metaphor***

New York City offers a lot of visual material to filmmakers, especially for one who is a newcomer. Since I arrived in New York, I have been impressed by the repetitive shapes of the city, the diverse styles and motifs and the height of the buildings which make me feel so small. All of these feelings about the form of the city helped me in my visual compositions. Through visual metaphor I was able to enrich the context of my shots and to add another layer of discourse. For example, in the New York University Library I was able to suggest some other meanings for the viewer that went beyond the obvious by playing with visual scale. For instance, we see an image that the audience does not recognize that appears like a labyrinth. Later, by changing the camera shot from an extreme long shot to a long shot, they realize that what they are seeing are the multiple floors of a building that the filmmaker is walking through. Then, through a medium-shot, the audience discovers more about what is going on – its a library with books that are central to the filmmaker's search for the history of Ottomans. Similarly, we see in the library a very abstract shot of hundreds of file card catalog drawers in the library and then a close up shot of my zeroing-in on a particular drawer with the name of the Sultan's family.

In another example of this, I am seen calling Turkish people to ask what they know about the Ottoman family. In this sequence, we see a long shot of the Manhattan Skyline. This dissolves into a shot of the windows of the apartments. By this change of camera shot, I wanted the audience to imagine that every window symbolizes the life of a person who might be a member of the Ottoman family. My main aim was to suggest to

the audience that things can be different than what they seem from the outside, and that in order to get to the truth or substance of a subject, we should look closely.

### ***Editing Decisions***

The most important challenge for me in editing this film was to avoid the temptation to be manipulative of the audience, especially in my use of music. This was important to me because when I worked as a producer-director in Turkey several years ago, we purposely used music in a formulaic way to provide flow in editing. However I later realized that our use of music influenced how viewers interpreted the images. I decided to adopt a style that would be true to my story of the search. But I was concerned that this might not always be sufficiently engaging to keep the audience involved and so I frequently found myself in tension over this issue. For example, in the introduction I show an image of the famous Istanbul skyline viewed from across the Bosphorus. Its a beautiful shot drenched in red, like an exaggerated sunset. Was I manipulating the audience with the traditional western notions of the exotic "orient"? In the end, I decided to keep the shot because I had not been consciously trying to manipulate the audience and because it really did seem acceptable for a title shot to show an image of the country where the Ottomans and I had lived in contrast to the city where I now lived. Also, because this film is in part about going beyond superficial images and stereotypes of Turkey, it seemed entirely appropriate to begin with the contrast of the classic postcard-type shots of the Istanbul and New York skylines.

In attempting to resolve questions of manipulation, it was important for me to frequently remind myself about the kind of documentary I was making. As I have already explained in a previous section, I was not attempting to make a direct documentary that pretends to present some objective reality. This documentary is an account of my own attempts to investigate and understand a phenomenon. To be honest with the viewer, I needed to share this process with them, including some of my own emotional engagement with the phenomenon. There are therefore times when the film does try to suggest excitement, tension or nervousness but these are times when I personally had these emotions. I concluded therefore that as long as I followed this rule in my editing, I was not being manipulative: if I had been effected emotionally in a certain way during my search it would be fine for me to attempt to affect the viewer in the same way.

### ***The Problem of Language***

Learning that HH Prince Ertugrul Osman could speak Turkish broke one of my stereotypes about how he would be. Because he had left Turkey before the new Turkish alphabet was launched in 1924, I had assumed that he would not speak Turkish. I was wrong. In order to share this truth with the audience I decided to make my interview with him in Turkish. At the same time, I used a second camera to catch the set-up and incidental events. I learned from this that he was much more relaxed and less "on guard" in English. He even explained on the other camera "they always try to trick me in Turkish interviews"! It might therefore have been better to have interviewed him in English, as the language that he is most comfortable with. But this was not something I could have known at the outset. I decided to correct this imbalanced account of him by using English in my subsequent interview in Central Park. This relaxed scene contrasts

with the formal interview in Turkish and helps communicate the warmth that was beginning to emerge between us.

## **HISTORICAL TRUTH AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS**

It was important for me to show that I had no doubts about my own country or its government nor that I had any revisionist dreams of history. I simply felt that I had not learned as much as I would like to have as a child about the demise of the Ottomans. I did not have any ideological or personal position about the Ottoman family and its worth but I had felt some childhood empathy for their plight that was now being felt again because of my own struggle with homesickness. I wanted to enrich my view of my culture rather than to replace any of it and I hoped that this would come through in the video that I would make:

Reflexivity clearly heightens our awareness of the constructed status of the documentary image and sound, yet reflexivity in the autobiographical documentary does not necessarily function as a strategy that overthrows the possibility of historical reference in documentary. Autobiographical documentaries use reflexivity not to eradicate the real as much as to complicate referential claims.<sup>5</sup>

By using a reflexive autobiographical approach I was able to show the viewer that my interest in the Ottomans as people did not mean that I am a close-minded, right-winged imperialist. I rather wanted to show that I was a proud but open-minded citizen of a democratic republic with the fascination and genuine empathy of a child for what happened to people whose lives were profoundly effected by historical circumstance. As

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<sup>5</sup> Lane, Jim. The Autobiographical Documentary in America. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin, 2002. p.18.

Jim Lane puts it: "...the historical and political efficacy of autobiography can be viewed as a strategy determined to resist the limiting ideology of universal identities." <sup>6</sup>

I did not pretend that the history that I showed was the truth. It was my own point of view...

...The interrelation of autobiography and documentary should not be held as a grand model of historical reference...Autobiographical documentaries resemble a view of the world, a view that we can recognize as authorized by someone, namely, the documentarist.<sup>7</sup>

## **HOW TO END THE FILM?**

" If I had a bad life, it would be better for your film" said Ertugrul Osman during my formal interview with him. Yes, it would have been an easy ending for my documentary to show a person who would have been the Sultan now living in poverty. But the documentary shows instead a person in good health that is kind, understanding and contemplative. My discussions with Mr.Osman were much more valuable than just helping me to fill in the gaps in my historical knowledge. I learned from a man who might have now been the head of a nation, if it were still a monarchy that more important than any loss of wealth, status, or even national identity is the sense of self-identity that we each create for ourselves. I learned something about the qualities that enable a person to have a clear sense of identity that has continuity with the past, no matter how conflicted that past might have been. Mr. Osman showed me that with an open-mind and a generous heart we can bridge enormous changes in our lives. I was therefore able to conclude the documentary by saying that more important than any

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.21.

status we may have in the world, such as being a sultan or the head of a family, is how we live our life. The real empire is our own life and how we each shape it.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.23.

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