

Exegesis “Leaving Kenya”

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Introduction

‘Leaving Kenya’ is an experimental film that follows the narratives of my late Grandfather and his best friend’s wife, June Elliot, as they decide to emigrate from their native Kenya in the 1960s, during a time of decolonization, political and social unrest, eventually ending up in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

In the making of the film, I wanted to find out more about the political context of the time, and the reasons why my grandfather left the country in which he was born and raised.

The film comprises of standard 8mm footage shot by my late grandfather, my own footage (including an interview with above mentioned June Elliot), news archive, commentary and audio recordings. A series of vignettes or memories are intercut with news archive from the time and commentary is provided by a Kenyan narrator. These vignettes attempt to follow my grandfather’s journey from Kenya to Auckland,

Aotearoa, via South Africa. The film ends with an excerpt from Kenya's first president Jomo Kenyatta which is overlaid with footage of the Kikuyu tribe filmed by my grandfather.

The experimental format favours the small screen (displayed in either a gallery setting or online) for intimate viewing as the footage was originally intended (and note the shorter duration as usually experienced within a gallery context). By comparison I would note Godard's film *The Image Book* (2018) - although shown on cinema screen, was designed for television as a reflective play on the medium itself (Derzhitskaya & Golotyuk, 2018).

The Process

The documentary is best suited to the reflective or reflexive mode as defined/described below:

reflexive

re·flex·ive | \ ri- 'flek-siv \

1a: directed or turned back on itself; *also* : overtly and usually

ironically reflecting conventions of genre or form a *reflexive* novel, as also elaborated by Goldson (2006:30):

Personal works frequently use experimental non-linear form as it has the ability to invite association, evoke a sense of mood, and suggest (rather than

assert) meaning, consistent with the vicissitudes of memory. Such form also draws attention to the discursive nature of the medium, inviting the spectator to realise how film can construct its subject.

The audio interview was recorded on my phone with my late Grandfather from his hospital bed in 2014, prior to his death in the same year. This was intended to accompany his family holiday footage transferred some years earlier. While questions were asked as to why he and his family left Kenya, there was no indication of any specific reasons to do with the Mau Mau rebellion at the time. It wasn't until uncovering my late uncles' police files from the 1960s about the Mau Mau in 2021 that alerted me to the scale of the conflict which I then began to research in more detail (Leakey 1952, Elkin 2005, footage from British News archives, see film credits). This then raised the general question of how recorded history - about the select people who 'made' history – intertwines with people's personal histories. In the meantime, I had also recorded the personal recollections of June Elliot (recorded 2021) who answered more directly as to why she left Kenya in terms of the Mau Mau conflict. She was certainly sympathetic towards the Mau Mau; *"If it wasn't for the Mau Mau, I don't think the British would have listened"*. However much of this interview was removed from the final edit as it felt disingenuous considering the scale of the historic conflict that was covered up by the British colonial government of

the time. When the facts emerged decades later, the British Government formally acknowledged the atrocities committed, as reported by Elkins (2013):

Hague acknowledged for the first time that the elderly Kikuyu and other Kenyans had been subjected to torture and other horrific abuses at the hands of the colonial administration during the Mau Mau emergency. On behalf of the British government he expressed "sincere regret" that these abuses had taken place, announced payments of £2,600 to each of 5,200 vetted claimants, and urged that the process of healing for both nations begin.

Hence in my film, the historical context of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya that ultimately led to independence from Britain is inferred, including the atrocities committed by British colonial forces. It is with the juxtaposition of the unnamed faces looking directly to camera and police files obtained from my late uncle that imply a more sinister meaning.

Individuals, in such cases, that are identified in historical records as '*Mitläufer*' (from the German denotation of de-Nazification concerning those who did not commit any crimes but did not resist the state terror) are a difficult category to come to terms with when personal histories are explored (cf. Krug, 2019, exploring her grandfather's history in the Third Reich). To a lesser degree Goldson (2006:35) raises 'amnesia and repression' relating to personal consequences of migration:

Our family 'amnesia and repression', the result of our immigration, led to my mother's, and consequently the family's, unhappiness. Certainly, this was rarely talked about and, in some ways, *Wake* can be seen as my attempt to articulate a palpable silence.

In June Elliot's and my family history however, there is no evidence that any subsequent unhappiness was due to the stress of immigration itself or the regret of what was left behind. Indeed, the opposite seems to be the case: June describes being ecstatic at arriving in Aotearoa. Also noted is the ease with which they were able to choose "*New Zealand or Australia*" and the colonialist contradictions this involves. I try to hint at this with the ironic use of music used here, namely a Maori farewell song - *Haere Ra E Hoa Ma - Maringi Noa - E Rere Ra Te Matangi* - rather than a welcoming. The 70's footage that follows present's "happy" memories, although this may not have necessarily been the case as the music suggests.

The "memory" of safari and the "*brown grassy plains*" again somewhat underplays the realities of what happened and paints a sentimental picture. Making a "new" life in New Zealand, as a personal history, is highlighted by my Super8 footage that begins the film, showing my grandfather on his beloved motorbike riding around suburban Auckland - and also features in the credits. In this way I honor my own memory of him and the many motorbike rides I took with him. Despite the dark history of Africa that unfolded for me during the making of the film, he remains a

loving father, husband and grandfather. Note the Kenyatta speech that ends the film, is purposely placed so as to not undermine the experience of the Kenyans involved.

The Approach

My own voice begins the narrative, thus asserting my authorship's point of view. The purpose of using the participatory mode is to take a personal approach over capturing a purely factual, academic history. As such, I present a series of memories as described in interview with my late grandfather and June Elliot who is survived by him, intercut with news archive from the time, commentary and a Kenyatta anti-colonialist speech.

Pictures are carefully matched to the audio interview, for example June Elliot speaks directly to the visuals of the "Birthday Party" with surprising clarity, some 70's years on. However, in some scenes, the pictures are selected for a contradictory effect; for example, when June Elliot describes a troubled existence in Kenya, the pictures show otherwise (a child in a swing, child in pram, June walking towards camera with her children). When June describes herself as "*people they didn't really want*" a Kenyan man (presumably her gardener) turns to look at the viewer. Here I subscribe to the reflective technique as used by Su Friedrich in Sink or Swim, as described by Camper (1991):

In a section titled "Quicksand" the narrator recounts a story about Friedrich's father forcing her to watch a scary movie. The imagery connects allusively,

rather than directly, to the title and to the story told on the sound track. We see footage taken from a roller coaster in relatively short takes and edited with a jagged, unpredictable rhythm; shots rarely feel as if they are brought to completion. This style combines with the sweeping movements of the roller coaster to create the feeling of a space that is continually dividing and breaking apart in ways that cannot be anticipated — one sees a vision of the world fraught with peril, unexpected voids, quicksand.

The visual imagery, combined with music, creates a tonal montage which is at odds to the happy family footage that is presented. Without the use of voice over and sometimes interview, music instead becomes an important thematic device used to give meaning not otherwise apparent in the footage itself. In some film genres this device is used as a main feature:

Music in a horror film, just as in any other cinematic genre, participates crucially in the creation of the film's meaning, and so close attention to the score with both the eye and the ear will generate readings of the film that do not emerge when considering only the visual and cinematographic elements (Lerner, 2010).

In terms of the overall effect of capturing events on 'film', the contradictory state of human affairs has an analogy in the tactile beauty of celluloid, with all its imperfections such as the flickering and grain, film roll, scratches and in some cases

burning (during the transfer process much of the footage was damaged). This is incorporated into the visual journey, used as backgrounds and transitions between scenes, adding to the temporal beauty of memory itself, as described in Marker's 1983 film *Sans Soleil*, "history to one, is memory to another".

History versus Memory

As indicated by above quote, the film's effect should be something like that also described by Huyssen (1994:253), suggesting that one response to the ever-greater ubiquity of real-time recording systems is an increasing interest in associated memory:

Both personal and social memory today are affected by an emerging new structure of temporality generated by the quickening pace of material life on the one hand and by acceleration of media images and information on the other. Speed destroys space, and it erases temporal distance. In both cases, the mechanism of physiological perception is altered. The more memory we store on data banks, the more the past is sucked into the orbit of the present, ready to be called up on the screen. A sense of historical continuity or, for that matter, discontinuity, both of which depend on a before and an after, gives way to the simultaneity of all times and spaces readily accessible in the present.

While memory has always been a connection between past and present, there has equally always been a disconnect between what really happened and what is being remembered, imagined, or dictated to have happened. In the extreme, for some people there is no recorded history at all, as noted by Wolf (2010:418):

The more ethnohistory we know, the more clearly "their" history and "our" history emerge as part of the same history. Thus, there can be no "Black history" apart from "White history," only a component of a common history suppressed or omitted from conventional studies for economic, political, or ideological reasons.

Here memory and history are disconnected in as much the invention of recorded history as film has added a perspective that is still poorly understood in all its implications, even though the underlying motives/purposes remain the same, e.g. propaganda, ideology, news, infotainment, evidence, deception. For example, the colonial news archive used first in my film is pure propaganda while the commentary used later revises the content to show its true purpose, i.e. to suppress the Kenyan independence movement by all means possible.

Conclusion

As an editor I want to emphasise that it is in the editing suite where narratives, such as my contribution, are constructed, de- and reconstructed: time is manipulated,

picture and interview are moved out of context to create a new reality. Archival material thus generated is yet another step in a process that is 'revisionist', placing my 'Leaving Kenya' both as a personal learning journey and a technical challenge, as noted by Derrida (1995, pp.16-17) concerning the general impact of editing ('technical structure'):

[T]he archive is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content of the past which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. This archivisation produces as much as it records the event.

However, being an editor by trade also interfered somewhat with my other hats as producer/director/writer inasmuch I agonised endlessly about sequencing rather than listening to my voice as the producer/director that envisaged the finished product.

Still, I hope to have achieved a modicum of success that can be seen by the interested viewer as a study in history and memory, public and personal.

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