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**The border between Reality and Fiction
in the work of Roberto Minervini.**

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v díle Roberta Minerviniho**

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Declaration

I declare that I have elaborated the Master's thesis entitled

The border between Reality and Fiction in the work of Roberto Minervini

independently, under the expert supervision of my thesis supervisor, and using only the literature and sources cited therein, and that the thesis was not used within the scope of a different university programme of study or to obtain the same degree or a different degree. I consent to the publication of the thesis/dissertation in accordance with legislation and with AMU internal regulations.

Prague, 10th August 2023.

Francesco Montagner


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Abstract

In my master thesis I focus on the work of Italian director Roberto Minervini, known for his style at the edge between documentary and fiction. The aim of this work is to explore the method of directing, which from his second film "Low Tide" till his last one "Louisiana: The Other Side", became progressively more oriented towards documentary observation.

The aim is to analyze the construction of the relationship with his characters, the blocking during the scenes and the participation of them during the creative process of ongoing writing.

Abstrakt

Ve své diplomové práci se zaměřuji na dílo italského režiséra Roberta Minerviniho, známého svým stylem na pomezí dokumentu a fikce. Cílem této práce je prozkoumat metoda režirování, který se od jeho druhého filmu „*Low Tide*“ až po jeho poslední „*Druhá strana?*“ postupně více orientovat na dokumentární pozorování.

Cílem je analyzovat vztah k jeho postavám, *blocking* během scén a jejich účast na tvůrčím procesu probíhajícího psaní.

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Introduction

The goal of my MA thesis is to investigate the border between fiction and reality in the filmography of the renowned Italian-born American-based author Roberto Minervini.

Minervini is one of the leading directors in the field of documentary making, known for his ability to masterfully mask the blending of fictional tools into the framework of documentary.

In the process of uncovering his directing methods, this thesis is going to analyze scenes from two of his documentary films, and one fiction: respectively *Stop the Pounding Heart* (2013), *Louisiana: The Other Side* (2015), and *Low Tide* (2012). This selection is justified by the gradual moving of his cinematic language to a progressively stronger presence of reality, loosening at each new film the net of fictional storytelling.

The thesis' aim is to expose the evidence of documentary elements and propose an in-depth analysis of the fictional tools used to direct these elements in a path of collaboration with social actors.

The method Minervini uses to blend reality and fiction in an extremely coherent and unique form and it is worthy of research for its quality of conveying the strength of fictional storytelling while maintaining the values of anthropological research of documentary making intact.

1. Minervini - The author

Roberto Minervini established his role in the contemporary scene of documentary filmmaking for his sincere and faithful portrayal of working-class characters. In his attempt to represent the individual and social contradictions of the South of the United States of America can be seen a direct contact with the tradition of Italian neorealist film making of Zavattini's "Theory of following"¹. The theory consists in stalking reality, following it without being seen and capturing human life in its real duration. Underlying the theory must be the "patience of the gaze" that can allow the camera to remain on the scene as long as necessary to understand, to dissect reality and inspect the other, in a need for coexistence and relations between men to grow deeper and deeper². Precisely in this style of observational filmmaking where the camera brings the audience close to following the characters through daily routines and intimate scenes, lies the remarkable talent of Minervini as director.

The absence of a tight plot-driven narration and the collaborative effort in developing a narrative arc with his character along the filming defines the uniqueness of his body of work lingering between fiction and documentary³.

One of the key aspects of Minervini's unique style is his long-term commitment to his projects. He spent extended periods of time living among the communities he intended to represent, building trust and forging deep connections with his subjects, who are often family relatives

¹ Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (1994). *Film history : An introduction* (p. 361). McGraw-Hill, New York.

² Perozzi, E. (2006, October 30). Cesare Zavattini: La rivoluzione dello sguardo. *Cinefile*. <http://www.cinefile.biz/cesare-zavattini-la-rivoluzione-dello-sguardo#:~:text=Per%20ques to%20motivo%20egli%20arriva,uomo%20nella%20sua%20reale%20durata>.

³ [ICA]. (2016, September 14). *Frames of Representation: The Other Side (Louisiana) Q&A* [Video]. Youtube.com. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cU_KpA9kn5Q&t=855s

or friends⁴. This care and closeness allows him to capture and build moments of true authenticity where the social actors play versions of themselves for the film⁵.

So, in terms of on-set directing he often combines semi-scripted elements with improvisation, allowing the characters to express themselves naturally and freely. This approach adds a sense of realism and immediacy to his films, making them feel like genuine slices of life.

In terms of visual approach to his cinema, Minervini's cinematography is characterized by long takes and a handheld camera style captured by his long-term collaborator Diego Romero Suarez-Llanos, who often used only one wide lens to create visual coherency and add another layer of vérité feel to his work⁶. Minervini's cinematography utilizes only natural light⁷, focusing on the emotional and psychological aspects of his subjects rather than elaborate visual aesthetics.

In terms of editing, Minervini forges his dramaturgy in a long-lasting collaboration with Marie-Helen Dozo⁸. The editor creates a feeling of lightness, meditative observation, and unusual fluidity for a documentary. It can be seen as a parallel to her work as an editor with classic directors

⁴ [ICA]. (2016, September 14). *Frames of Representation: The Other Side (Louisiana) Q&A* [Video]. Youtube.com. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cU_KpA9kn5Q&t=855s

⁵ Taxi Driver, R. (2015, November 27). Stasera alle 21,15 su Rai 5 Stop the Pounding Heart di Roberto Minervini. *Taxi Drivers*, 1. <https://www.taxidrivars.it/70985/stasera-in-tv/stasera-alle-2115-su-rai-5-stop-the-pounding-heart-di-roberto-minervini.html>

⁶ [I Wonder Picture]. (2021, January 15). *Anteprima Live "Stop the pounding heart" con il regista Roberto Minervini* [Video]. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=1530656303801610

⁷ Rooney, D. (2013, May 17). Stop the Pounding Heart: Cannes Review. *The Hollywood Reporter*, 1. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/stop-pounding-heart-cannes-review-524583/>

⁸ Taxi Driver, R. (2015, November 27). Stasera alle 21,15 su Rai 5 Stop the Pounding Heart di Roberto Minervini. *Taxi Drivers*, 1. <https://www.taxidrivars.it/70985/stasera-in-tv/stasera-alle-2115-su-rai-5-stop-the-pounding-heart-di-roberto-minervini.html>

like the Dardenne brothers, who also investigate social realities through a delicate and intimate approach to fictional filmmaking. Minervini structures his film in the editing process building a loose narrative from rushes which often amount to a few hundred hours of footage.

Thematically, Minervini's films tackle social and political issues, shedding light on marginalized communities and individuals. He explores topics such as poverty, racism, addiction, and overall social injustices, bringing the audience unnaturally close with uncomfortable realities and challenging them to leave aside their own preconceptions and biases⁹. Minervini stated: "My films in a way [] are an attempt to experience first hand what's going on in some of the communities in the American south and get a sense of the magnitude of the issues¹⁰."

In sum, Roberto Minervini's style can be seen as a typical example of humanism in cinema where the everyday man is put at the center of the storytelling with a great degree of attention to anthropological investigation of his world. Although, it has to be stated that Minervini's perspective might be affected by a European gaze or Leftist ideological bias¹¹ towards the represented communities. The director has been often criticized, especially by American media, of exploitation of the social conditions or romanticization of the issues he investigates in the films¹². To counterbalance the criticism, the characters of his film always showed appreciation and a sense of being correctly represented, constituting one

⁹ Pomponio, D. (2013, December 5). STOP THE POUNDING HEART. *Quinlan. Rivista di Critica Cinematografica*. <https://quinlan.it/2013/12/05/stop-the-pounding-heart/>

¹⁰ [DAFilms]. (2021, May 19). *DAFilms Conversations: Roberto Minervini* [Video]. Dafilms.com. <https://dafilms.com/live/entry/22-roberto-minervini>

¹¹ [Film at Lincoln Center]. (2016, May 12). 'The Other Side' Q&A | Roberto Minervini | *Art of the Real* [Video]. Youtube.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMKrJqswndM&t=2s>

¹² Samarov, D. (2016, July 21). The Other Side. *Chicago Reader*. <https://chicagoreader.com/film/the-other-side-2/>

of the bases of qualitative anthropological research. Minervini claimed: "Every time I access the community, every time I embark on a journey with them, I feel there is a deeper level of commitment and appreciation from people knowing that those chances [of being represented] don't come very often¹³."

¹³ [DAFilms]. (2021, May 19). *DAFilms Conversations: Roberto Minervini* [Video]. Dafilms.com. <https://dafilms.com/live/entry/22-roberto-minervini>

2. Documentary and fiction: basic differences.

In this short chapter I am going to briefly define in analytical terms the core elements that can be used to define the differences between fiction and documentary.

Generally, documentary and fiction are interpreted fundamentally as two distinct ways of approaching filmmaking that differ in style, purpose, narration and relationship with reality.

Fiction requires use of actors, mise en scene, locations and a script, while documentary tends to capture reality directly, through filming of "social actors" interacting freely and truly with their real environments.

Below are the key elements that could be used to distinguish documentary from fiction:

Subject: Documentary subjects are rooted in real-life events, characters, and issues. They tend to present an objective or subjective portrayal of reality, often exploring social, political, historical, or cultural topics¹⁴. Fiction, on the other hand, as the word itself suggests, is fully created from the imagination of the author and can encompass a wide range of fictitious narratives, stories, and characters, which could also be unrelated and very distant from reality.

Directing: Documentaries usually employ a more observational or participatory approach to filmmaking. They may use interviews, archival footage, vérité or observational style, and non-professional actors, called

¹⁴ Nichols, B. (2001). *Introduction to Documentary* (pp. 20-41). Indiana University Press.

social actors, to capture real-life situations and people¹⁵. Fiction films, on the other hand, rely on scripted narratives, professional actors, sets, and staged scenes to create a fictional world.

Creative Control: In documentaries, the filmmaker has a lower degree of control over narrative, story arch and evolution due to the unpredictability of reality. Editing becomes consequently one of the most creative phases of the filmmaking process, structuring dramaturgically almost the whole film.

Fiction filmmakers, on the other hand, have complete control over the narrative, characters, and visual style, allowing them to create and manipulate fictional worlds according to their artistic vision.

Cinematography: commonly, the two “genres” are identifiable at first sight by a very distant approach to cinematic language and work with the camera. Fiction is usually associated with a more sophisticated cinematography which, through the use of perfect blocking and framing, can achieve high standards of production value and cinematic language. In the traditional perception of cinema, a more raw and less precise approach to cinematography is stereotypically related to documentary making. Due to a limited use of staging, the chances to reach the precision of fiction while capturing reality (see observational documentary¹⁶), is rather hard, if not even impossible.

¹⁵ Nichols, B. (2001). *Introduction to Documentary* (pp. 20-41). Indiana University Press.

¹⁶ Nichols, B. (2001). *Introduction to Documentary* (pp. 109-115). Indiana University Press.

3. Low Tide: fiction with documentary elements

The start of the analysis of Minervini's body of work is from his sophomore feature *Low Tide* (2012), the second chapter of the "Texan trilogy", and the first one to have documentary elements in its approach to filmmaking. Even though the film has been widely labeled as fiction¹⁷, it can be seen as a first step moving from his fiction debut *The Passage* (2011)¹⁸ into a more real approach to story and characters.

One of the directing elements which separate this second piece from traditional fictional stories is the total absence of a script, which is a constant in Minervini's subsequent films. The director states that the story arc was developed day by day in collaboration with the characters¹⁹. During the filming, he used to take notes reflecting the content of the daily filmed footage and build progressively the story evolution following logical steps heading to a likely predefined climax (the dramatic attempt of suicide ending the film)²⁰.

The film's synopsis: "A 12 year old boy [Daniel] and his single mother [Melissa] live separate lives. The boy spends his days alone while his mother works and goes out with her friends. The boy's solitude is both a source of freedom and a cause for grief. His explorations slowly bring to light the dark contrast between the rules of society and the laws of nature. And before long, the delicate balance of his inner world becomes

¹⁷ (n.d.). *Low Tide*. International Film Festival Rotterdam.
<https://iffrr.com/en/iffrr/2013/films/low-tide>

¹⁸ [Rivista Uzak]. (2013, June 11). *Roberto Minervini - "Low Tide" - Daniela Turco (1° parte)- REGISTI FUORI DAGLI SCHE(R)MI 2* [Video]. Youtube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSTxM1N4C-Y&t=906s>

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ [Rivista Uzak]. (2013, June 11). *Roberto Minervini - "Low Tide" - Daniela Turco (2° parte)- REGISTI FUORI DAGLI SCHE(R)MI* [Video]. Youtube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSTxM1N4C-Y&t=905s>

shattered by unforeseen events²¹.” Daniel faces progressively stronger abuses from his mother until the point of attempting suicide to get finally her attention.

The reason behind this directing method is the fact that both protagonists had experienced similar dramatic events as the one narrated in the film. Indeed, Minervini took inspiration from the past story of the co-protagonist Melissa McKinney, playing the mother in the film, and the real abusive relationship with her absent mother to form a realistic tale with her real step-brother Daniel Blanchard, the main protagonist, playing the part of the son. Melissa interpreted the role of her own toxic mother and Daniel the one of hers as a child. In this psychologically therapeutic reinterpretation of past reality, where the victim plays the perpetrator, we can find strong affinities with the directing work of social actors in documentary making. Often documentary directors use known past experiences of the characters or certain specific psychological traits to reveal a hidden reality, or to create a new one, ultimately digging in the character’s real psychology.

An example of it could be seen in Victor’s Kossakovsky’s first feature *Belovs* (1993). In the final scene of the film, the director makes the main protagonist listen to the sound recording of previously recorded fights with her brother. The pain evoked by the listening pushes the female protagonist to dance in a likely choreographed manner, and sing to defeat the despair, gifting the film an ending which would have not existed without this evocative tool.

In *Low Tide* Minervini asked the female protagonist to relive the traumas of her childhood by interpreting the role of her own mother, revealing

²¹ Minervini, R. (2012, September 2). LOW TIDE. *Cineuropa*.
<https://cineuropa.org/en/film/225089/>

elements of reality through her interpretation of the role and by suggesting scenes to the director collaborating to the story's evolution. Generally, the presence of reality is strong in the use of social actors instead of more conventional actors or simply non-actors interpreting events far from their worlds. The fact of using elements from their reality to create authenticity, through reenactments, can be often seen in observational directing practices of character-driven contemporary documentaries such as *Fire at Sea* (2016) by G.Rosi, *The Distant Barking of Dogs* (2017) by S.L.Wilmont.

In *Low Tide* the hierarchy defining the relationship directors-actors in fiction filmmaking is replaced by a symbiotic directing approach in which the research of a story is conducted together with the characters. This is evident from many moments of the film which are the result of rehearsed situations based on improvisations between the characters.

So where is the point in which the pure fictionality of the film can be clearly identified? Surely in the dramatization of the ending where Daniel attempts suicide by drinking from a bottle of detergent (1:21:52).



A shot of the above-mentioned scene where Daniel ingests laundry detergent.

This scene can belong only to fictional filmmaking for objective reasons of safety and ethics, and due to the closeness, unusual for documentary practice, to such a private and dramatic action as an attempted suicide (which the social actor would not share with the crew in a context of documentary).

The scene contrasts with a large number of other scenes where the protagonist Daniel relates to animals and people with a degree of freedom of action and authenticity typical of reality in documentaries. Probably the side characters of the film belong to the real community of the boy. Specifically, it can be stated that the exposure of the boy to the cow slaughter at minute (50:33) is an example of a real reaction of the social actor to a true event. Indeed, this specific scene could be likely inserted in a realm of observation in terms of exposing a character to a dramatic situation and not as performance of a predetermined emotion.

However, the presence of these elements which have a good degree of connection to documentary making doesn't qualify *Low Tide* as a documentary, but they are relevant for a further analysis of Minervini's directing style in his subsequent works.

One last feature which defines this film is that most of the characters are also social actors belonging to the world in which the director lives and the level of trust he is used to gain from them, is a direct equivalent to the one documentary filmmakers have to conquer to get access to real stories. A level of trust and confidence that surely exists rarely in fictional filmmaking, where the real world of the actors isn't discussed by the director or used to let a story emerge without a scripted narrative.

4. Stop the Pounding Heart: a semi-documentary with fictional tools

Stop the Pounding Heart (2013), as the last chapter of the Texan Trilogy, represents the first approach to observational documentary of Roberto Minervini in his career. The film can be identified as a constant cross-over, playing along the border between reality and fiction. We could define it as a semi-documentary with a high degree of directorial control aiming at structuring a narrative arc with social actors playing themselves. Minervini stated: "by default, I should say it's a hybrid. It has a lot of value as a documentary. The characters are represented faithfully. At the same time is the story I wanted to tell about them"²².

From this statement comes the definition of the film as a semi-documentary, but also it can be derived by the higher degree of freedom of the characters compared to fiction and the lack of predetermined narrative in their story. These elements constitute the bases for documentary making, since they imply an exploration of reality.

The film is about "Sara, a young girl raised in a family of goat farmers. Her parents homeschool their twelve children, rigorously following the precepts of the Bible. Like her sisters, Sara is taught to be a devout woman, subservient to men while keeping her emotional and physical purity intact until marriage. When Sara meets Colby, a young amateur bull rider, she is thrown into crisis, questioning the only way of life she has ever known. In a stunning portrayal of contemporary America and the insular communities that dot its landscape, *Stop the Pounding Heart* is an

²² [Jdylan131]. (2014, March 23). *Roberto Minervini - STOP THE POUNDING HEART* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsbsIYRUf54&t=270s>

exploration of adolescence, family and social values, gender roles, and religion in the rural American South.²³”

Generally, the perception of the viewer connects the film to the ambiguity of a documentary where the characters and camera movements reveal a degree of uncertainty which is typical of the observational approach. In several scenes the camera follows the main character Sara in her daily activities exploring slowly and simply her world. The scenes are dramatically subdued and they mostly focus on Sara’s face, trying to investigate her inner emotions and struggles. Comparing it to the fictional setting of *Low Tide*, *Stop the Pounding Heart* portrays the lives of the protagonists Sara and Colby in a context of true reality.

4.1 The origin of the film

In order to better understand the context in which Minervini directed Sara and Colby, it can be emphasized that the director encountered the Carlson family of the protagonist in an area not far from the location where he usually lives. This Texan family belongs to the Southern-American world that Minervini is dedicated to represent in his cinema and to which he has strong personal ties due to his marriage to a Texan woman²⁴.

Minervini and the Carlson family met at a farmer’s market in 2008. The family, of strong religious beliefs, was selling dairy products grown in their farm. The director approached them asking for permission to include them in a scene of his debut film *The Passage*²⁵. After this first collaboration he wanted them to be the center of a new film since Sara’s family is a typically large family of strong Christian beliefs which represents an

²³ (n.d.). *Stop the Pounding Heart*. IMDB.

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2855026/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

²⁴ [Jdylan131]. (2014, March 23). *Roberto Minervini - STOP THE POUNDING HEART* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsbsIYRUf54&t=270s>

²⁵ Ibid

archetype of the American Bible Belt. Coby, the second protagonist of the film, belongs to a closer circle of the director's family friends, symbolizing a type of Southern masculinity linked to the use of weapons and fandom of rodeos.

Therefore, in both cases the director gained easy access to the characters thanks to the above-mentioned relationships, overcoming the very first challenge required in documentary making for a truthful and intimate representation of people's lives. Minervini said: "We care about each other and that's always the necessary condition for me to make films"²⁶.

Although, it was Minervini's idea to connect these geographically close, but culturally distant realities with the aim of testing Sara's capability to open her heart to men of her age. "The families knew of each other, but I was the one putting them together. [] I was the one who was saying: let's test the situation. So, I was the one to put the families together. Interference. After that whatever happened, it happened organically"²⁷.

This initial intervention of the director is one of the fictional tools he used in a framework of documentary reality. Minervini created a path for his characters in a strongly more systematic way than in the common practice of documentary films where the director interferes with the characters' lives, to structure, to push the present situations, but not often to generate a brand new one. Connecting two realities which do not know each other, feel culturally very distant, hoping for a positive interaction, definitely requires profound trust, knowledge of the character's psychology, and a good initial casting.

²⁶ [Jdylan131]. (2014, March 23). *Roberto Minervini - STOP THE POUNDING HEART* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsbsIYRUf54&t=270s>

²⁷ Ibid

4.2 The question of casting

Besides the human proximity to the characters, Minervini pays a lot of attention in casting of the social actors. Focusing on the case study of *Stop the Pounding Heart*, why Sara was chosen as the leading protagonist in a family of fourteen people, out of which eight daughters? If he wanted to focus on the female side, why specifically Sara among all of her sisters? Her age (15 years old) was definitely one of the factors since the director's wish to represent the struggle between romantic love and doubt in faith can be correctly represented at such an adolescent age.

However, the main reason is likely Sara's remarkable authenticity in front of the camera. Minervini's cinema is characterized by evocative faces, which constitute, more than the verbal side, the emotional arc for the audience. The camera often indulges in long takes only on the main protagonists' facial reactions leaving aside all the other social actors. In terms of narrative language, this and the following films are strongly character-driven, relying entirely on the psychological exploration and evolution of the leading character. Sara's performative natural quality ties the viewer to the screen almost as much as trained actors in fiction cinema.

Indeed, there is a certain parameter of selection in Minervini's process of casting, which guides him to characters that show a strong performative talent and legibility of their emotions. Undoubtedly, the degree of access and the mutual trust in the relationship director-social actors play a central role in the ability of the characters to express authenticity, but it isn't the only factor.

Generally speaking, Minervini's social actors act at a perfect speed for the camera, their movements do not reveal uncertainty in their tasks and the camera is always in a good position for composing a rather perfect image.

These elements lead to a big question of the degree of fictionalization of reality in his cinema.

4.3 The fictional tools

Compared to *Low Tide*, *Stop the Pounding Heart* presents the use of fictional tools in order to achieve a comprehensive narration too, but in a rather freer ground for the social actors to interpret themselves and self-determine their paths. At the same time, it can be said that the degree of intervention of the director is surely much higher than in an observational documentary.

To analyze *Stop the Pounding Heart* from the start, it can be observed that up to the first 10 minutes of the film there is an observational approach analogous to documentary making. The two protagonists, Sara and Colby, are followed by the camera in their daily activities in form of simple observation and edited parallelly. Even if these actions are the result of a directorial decision, they still seem natural and believable in a documentary setting.

In the beginning of the film, Minervini decided to expose the characters individually so as to frame them through the respective iconic elements of their worlds: heavily Christian and goat-farming for Sara, bull-riding and gun-loving for Colby. This goal is achieved with a high degree of cinematic quality, but still in a range of believable representation of reality. Indeed, the characters act naturally and perform trivial duties with not much complexity, making it possible to show them through the means of documentary.

However, in the scene at minute 11, when the two protagonists meet for the first time, it can be identified a degree of actor's instructions revealing the starting point of the directorial intervention in the film, altering the

field of initial mundane documentary reality. That can be said due to the confidence shown by the characters in their actions, lacking the common hesitation of social actors' bodies in documentaries. They move in a way which is unnaturally fluid and consistent as if it was the result of a predetermined goal. Furthermore, Colby and his peer seem to have received clear instructions to lead the scene by constantly involving Sara's family group into a sequence of actions like riding the training bull-model or simply guiding the siblings into riding real bulls in the rodeo. The cowboys keep engaging them through questions and seek their participation in order to keep up the level of performative energy and move forward the scene. Without their attempts to involve Sara's siblings, the scene would lack any drive and fall flat.

In the first 2 minutes of this scene the camera observes Colby interacting with the younger brothers of Sara, while she moves shyly out of the frame, heading towards the edge of the location. This initial part is shot in a style of simple observation and organic reaction to the natural evolution of the scene. The camera reacts to the documentary moments seeking the best framing. At this point it can be stated that, besides the initial "impulse" of the director opting for the meeting and the likely instructions on how to proceed, there is a sense of freedom and reality in their behavior. The social actors interact inside a controlled framework decided by Minervini in a manner common to documentary observation.

Although, this feeling breaks in the moment the camera reaches Sara's face at minute (12:47), revealing the use of some blocking.



The above-mentioned shot declaring a possible start of the blocking.

Even though Sara is standing at the edge of the frame, the camera is found observing her face in a crucial moment when she gets called by Colby. The cinematographer pans perfectly on time following her movement towards the cowboy. The framing, including the rest of the group in the background, seems too well composed to be the result of pure observation without prior blocking. Indeed, such precision of movement, that is usually associated with fiction cinema, can be hardly achieved with consistency in documentary. It can be said that the cinematographer knew of the next action and was waiting for her reaction to the call to start walking behind her.

The same perception of orchestrated line of actions can be observed in the same scene at minute (16:04) when Sara is being filmed from the back observing the bull riding. She is watching the last bull being dragged into the metal stalls (action declaring an almost certain end of the scene in a documentary) and within a few seconds, with odd precision, her mother calls her for help, extending the length of a scene which would have

otherwise been complete. Sara turns to the mother, starting to walk towards her as a result of her request. There is no hesitation in the girl's decision and subsequent movement; neither a last look at the bulls or Colby, declaring uncertainty or a wish to stay. There is just a secure action to the new "goal". In her performance, Sara seems to be reacting to external predetermined stimulations, but with a remarkable naturalness. Also in this case, the camera turns in coordination with Sara when she moves towards the mother, reaching both figures on time and finding a perfect frame for the whole action.

The scene evolves further into having Sara and her mother meet a local man to sell their dairies to. This sequence of actions is the result of a succession of directives which have the specific goal of bringing forward the narration by exposing the core trouble of Sara, divided between the fascination for Colby, hence the exotic manly world, and her family through the duty of work, often carried out by women.

In this last part of the scene, focused on the dairy selling, the camera is consistently in the right angles to capture the actions despite the objective difficulties to film, in a fluid and successful manner, first the dialogue between the mother and the local man and, right after, Sara bringing the milk inside the van. The scene has a strong dynamism and it cannot be spontaneously recorded with such cinematographic quality unless there is a known sequence of actions. Minervini's statement that no scene is ever repeated, or shot in multiple takes, confirms the need of blocking for such a long and complex scene.

Furthermore, the newly introduced side character, the male buyer, doesn't show a single sign of discomfort or surprise for the presence of the crew. Even imagining being in a pure observational documentary and cutting his "uneasy" moments out from the final edit, still there would be minor signs left of either slight discomfort or curiosity in his body language. None of these are indeed present marking the fictionality of the situation.

A last feature which reflects the fictionality of these three parts of the scene (meeting, bull riding and selling) is the geography of the location. All happens in a very limited walking area and in a rather short timeframe (probably 30 minutes). It is very rare in documentary filming to have multiple parts of a scene in locations reachable by a "walking camera" distance, hence making it very complex to film successfully many angles of the same scene, especially outdoors. To sum, the proximity and the timing of the three parts reinforces the idea of fictionalization of a constructed reality.

A further core element of difference between the pure fiction *Low Tide* and *Stop the Pounding Heart* is in the use of the jump cuts in scenes like the above-mentioned one, where there is substantial characters' interaction. In *Low Tide*, there are often complex orchestrated camera movements which manage to capture the mother-son relationship in a continuous long shot (see minute 18:42). In this scene the two characters appear often in the same frame and there are very few jump cuts in the editing. On the other hand, in *Stop the Pounding Heart*, it is hard to find scenes where there isn't an abundance of jump cuts which connect the two protagonists in montage. This states the relative freedom of the characters inside a predetermined scene structure which likely involved blocking, but not rigidly. An example of it is the first meeting between Sara and Colby analyzed earlier. The two protagonists are rarely in the same frame and the camera tends to focus on one of the two character's faces at a time. The panning or movements are oddly precise for a documentary approach, but still less perfect than in the fictional setting of *Low Tide*. By bringing more freedom to the characters, Minervini had to lower his degree of control and precision over actions and make a directorial decision on which character to focus on. Indeed, most of the story arc's tension between the two protagonists, about their presumed love interest, is

constructed often by exploring the possibility of editing them more in parallel than in the same frame.

The role of time in the filming of *Stop the Pounding Heart* seems to be one of the crucial factors in Minervini's directing method. In multiple occasions he confirmed that this film was shot in digital, differently from the film-stock *Low Tide* and *The Passage*, specifically because of the possibility of using extensive length of shots, around 30 minutes long²⁸. This length would allow the protagonists to express themselves freely, without interruptions, but likely inside a precise scheme, like in the above-mentioned scene divided in: meeting, rodeo and sell. Within such a long recording the characters can forget about the presence of the camera and perform a semi-rehearsed situation both with the confidence of fiction and with the degree of spontaneity of documentary. Minervini said: "I needed pretty much long takes since I was depicting emotions and I knew I would need up to 30 minutes long takes... and one take only obviously.[]I don't cut."²⁹ This statement declares that the analyzed scene was filmed in one long continuous take. However, despite the lack of directing while filming the scene or interruptions, the objective quality of the character's interactions and the three parts of it would be possible only under the condition of a directorial intervention prior to the scene. It is likely that Minervini and the social actors discussed roughly how the scene would play beforehand and made sure the director would get the elements needed to bring forward the narration.

Exploring even further the fictional tools of directing, Minervini said: "I didn't take any notes during the shoot either. I did it [only] because I knew I have a bad memory, so I knew that I would feel completely lost in the middle of the shoot...or at some point. [] Because I don't ever review

²⁸ [Jdylan131]. (2014, March 23). *Roberto Minervini - STOP THE POUNDING HEART* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsbsIYRUf54&t=270s>

²⁹ Ibid

footage. I would have not remembered what I shot and I would not know what film I was making. [] I wanted them because I didn't want to have a preconceived story. So, at some point I had to let go of everything. Dedicate myself to depicting what I saw and be present for the moment."³⁰ The statement not only insists on the subtle border between fiction and documentary which *Stop the Pounding Heart* is constantly crossing, but also defines the limits of control he had over the story arc, strong in the first part of the film, then progressively loosened.

Continuing with the film's analysis, at minute 17 there is the closing shot for the above-mentioned sequence. After a jump cut declaring a certain passage of time from the sale of the dairy, Sara is shown petting a cow in the reflexive mood of the magic hour. This type of simple action could be usually inserted in the field of pure documentary observation, but the quality of cinematography with a perfect back light, a sun reflecting on the water pond and the presence of the family van in the background, reveals a certain manipulation of composition, and positioning of the protagonist, based on light conditions. This is just one first example of many shots in the film which show the same degree of manipulation over pure observation due to the strong composition, position of social actors and lighting.

³⁰ [Jdylan131]. (2014, March 23). *Roberto Minervini - STOP THE POUNDING HEART* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsbsIYRUf54&t=270s>



The frame of the above-mentioned scene where Sara pets the cow backlit.

A Result of the strong fictionalization is also in the subsequent scene in the church, one of the few moments in the film where non-diegetic music appears. Sara is shown among her sisters praying while organ music plays in the background. The composition of the shot reveals the intent of directing to make Sara stand out of the group. Indeed, the shot is highly stylized, almost clashing with the previous documentary-like feeling. The sisters are in a totally empty church, positioned in a front row, rigidly all heads down and Sara emerges as the leading figure through lighting and body presence, like the main character would in the framing of a fiction film. Compared to the previous scenes, there are no camera movements and no actions in the scene whatsoever. The characters feel as static figurines in a decided composition in order to show their devotion.



The stylized frame of Sara praying with her three sisters.

The following shot is a static close-up of Sara in a praying position holding hands together in front of a stained-glass window typical of churches. Both the shots have a visually over-stylized effect as opposed to the rest of the material and the film. They are the result of a static staging since they lack beginning, middle or end actions. They function as postcards to reinforce to the audience the information of the religiosity of the sisters. Further, the strong presence of the organ music in the sound and the low tone of the room ambient create a sense of abstraction from reality, hence prevailing a fictional space over a real one.

The scene of the church ends with the camera preceding Sarah and her family leaving the building. Character's and camera movement starts reacquiring the same cinematic language and dynamism of before. Analyzing the performances, it can be observed that Sarah's sister is trying to not look at the camera in front of her, preferring to look down shyly. Instead, Sarah feels the most natural of the family, managing not to look into the lens, while standing as leader of the group, in front of the

others. This natural performative quality of her confirms the casting choice of Minervini who selected her among the family siblings for her expressiveness and ability as a social actor.

Furthermore, the sense of fictionality of the scene is given by the use of sound. While Sarah and her sister are walking in front of the group, behind them other two sisters are visibly talking. The conversation is not audible and in the whole scene the use of foley sound for the steps is dominating over other sounds. This treatment of sound stands in opposition to the field of reality in documentary where any type of nearby conversation would be heard due to the direct sound recording. The reason for this directing choice is likely to submerge the viewer into a calm and reflexive, post-prayer mood.

Fictionalization comes also at minute 55 when Sarah and her sisters walk into the evening woods dressed in period costumes. The themes of womanhood and sisterhood are dominant in the scene while they comment on an old book about marriage while having a picnic. The feeling of being at the beginning of the 20th century clashes with the overall sense of realism and modernity that the film has shown until this point. The scene doesn't reveal the reason behind such unusual practice of dressing like in a period drama³¹ and there is no following or prior scene which relates to it.

Therefore, it can be assumed that it was Minervini's idea to stylize this sequence by introducing an element of mystery into the realm of realism.

³¹ Rooney, D. (2013, May 17). Stop the Pounding Heart: Cannes Review. *The Hollywood Reporter*, 1.
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/stop-pounding-heart-cannes-review-524583/>



A frame of Sara with her four sisters making braids.

Despite the clearly staged above-mentioned scene, the dramaturgy of costume design appears to be very consistent throughout the film, linking it to a fictional approach to storytelling. Indeed, Sara is almost always wearing the same purple shirt in all the scenes, even though the amount of time passed in the filming account to several weeks of filming, making it hard to believe to be using the same clothing for the whole period. The need for recognisability of the main actor through the costume contaminated the overall sense of observation.

One last element of reality reconstruction is shown at 1 hour and 10 minutes when Colby and a female friend walk in a dark field towards a giant burning cross. The dramatic function of this scene is to represent a certain ritual of the South of the United States, but it is shown outside of any story-related context. It can not be understood the connection between Colby and a symbol which relates iconically to the Ku Klux Klan

and other extremist religious groups³². This scene alone, without a previous and following scene, explaining the reason for the cross and especially what it does represent to the characters, does not function well with the subdued drama of the film or in relation to the documentary elements of it.

Even though it can be assumed that this phenomenon happens in nearby areas of the region of Texas, it's hard to believe that Colby would have an organic connection to that specific world. There was no prior suggestion of links between the intense religiosity of the bull-riding community and this symbol.

Therefore, once again in this three-shot brief descriptive scene, lacking a middle and an end similarly to the church scene, characters are shown as non-talking figurines in front of an archetypical symbol.



A frame of Colby and his friend watching the burning cross.

³² Cross burning. (2023, August 1). In *Wikipedia*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cross_burning

The idea of staging itself does not automatically distance *Stop the Pounding Heart* from the realm of documentary since reenactments are a common practice in this form of cinema, but the quality of the performances of the social actors do generally reveal a clear directorial work with them. In most of Minervini's films, both purely fictional like *Low Tide* or hybridized with documentary like *Stop the Pounding Heart*, characters act in a similar fashion. There is a sense of slow pensiveness, intimacy, austerness in their interpretation of the part, making the performances strangely consistent not only throughout the film, which would already be hard to achieve in documentary, but also comparable between different films. The social actors likely received some training on how to perform, starting from some basic rules like speaking one at the time, reacting right away to a spoken line in order to keep the action flow, to a more complex approach involving movements and sometimes blocking. Surely, knowing the aim of the scene as the result of a prior discussion with the director, made it fairly easy for the social actors to not show uncertainty, or to behave organically to the feeling of the film, moving away from the contradictory dynamics that people have in reality. Indeed, in the large majority of the scenes there is a congruous feeling of fluidity, lacking any sort of ambiguity typical of documentary performances. Their emotions are shown clearly, rather than cryptically. To sum up, the fact that in both of the two analyzed films, the characters perform in a way showing more common denominators than differences, is a crucial indicator of the strong degree of intervention of Minervini in reality to shape it according to his directorial vision.

4.4 The documentary tools

After analyzing the fictional elements in *Stop the Pounding Heart* it is important to note that the film is also strongly linked to a documentary nature. As Minervini said in an interview³³: "I just knew that the daughters go to the mother every time they have a question. She's their confessional.[] It happens frequently that they question their own Christianity, of being worthy of God and I knew that when Sara was ready to talk about that, whenever she felt she was ready for us and for herself, we would film that." This represents the solid documentary ground on which the director constructed the whole film narration. Minervini could count on a narrative arc, composed of multiple confessions, which would eventually lead to a clear end: the emotional crisis of Sara in front of her mother. This real event has the function to validate through documentary observation the fictional set-up of Sara's and Colby's connection, which likely contributed to her breakdown.

Especially the last "confession" of Sara to the mother can be labeled as one of the leading documentary moments of the film (1:28:07). The scene was recorded in a moment of observation on the very last day of 54 days of filming. The director said that it surged organically after 9 minutes of continued silence out of a 27 minutes long shot. "I didn't even know I would get that dialogue out of it. Without that scene it would have been a totally different film. That says a lot about this almost autogenic quality of the film" Minervini said³⁴.

However, even if we cannot consider the scene of Sara opening up to the mother as pure documentary observation, due to the prior agreement the director had with her to express this crisis as the main goal of the film, it

³³ [Jdylan131]. (2014, March 23). *Roberto Minervini - STOP THE POUNDING HEART* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsbsIYRUf54&t=270s>

³⁴ Ibid

still represents a solid documentary work of research, character's exploration and it shows the strong dependence of the film on the realm of reality.

Beside the confessions, several other scenes of *Stop the Pounding Heart* express an observational approach, for example the scene when the group of siblings talk inside the family house (1:17:00) about getting married or having children and Sara gets asked the specific question: "What do you want to do?". "I don't want to get married," she replies, implying the contradictions between the education she received from her mother and her real beliefs. Even though it is clear the director planted the topic of the scene to reveal ambitions, dreams and hopes of Sara and the sisters, the scene seems to have a natural, realistic flow, without blocking or preconceived structure. The cinematographer is clearly positioned in a good angle to frame in close-ups the whole scene without the need of blocking. Therefore, this scene constitutes one of the many documentary elements of the film.

Furthermore, in the scene where Sara is bringing for the second time her little brothers to play with the cowboys (1:12:20), it can be identified an element of documentary rupture from the directorial intention. As stated earlier, Minervini constructed Sara and Colby's connection, pushing them to relate to each other. In this scene Colby asks Sarah to engage with the bull-model as well as her brothers. In this second scene of the film revolving around the same dynamic, there is a new refusal of Sara to engage with riding, preferring to drift away. Here the construction of the director reveals its limits by showing that the meeting of the two is more of a fictional wish of his than a natural event possibly evolving in any direction. In the scene, Sara simply stands far from the cowboy and looks in silence before leaving to interact with the horses, her way of showing love, more organic to her calm nature, opposed to the restless character

of Colby. In this moment, documentary takes over fiction, showing the real character of Sara and the little interest she has for Colby or his world.

There is one last important moment of documentary quality in *Stop the Pounding Heart* and it is the scene of the birth (1:15:10). The scene has a similar intent as the scene of the cow slaughtering in *Low Tide*, previously discussed. By exposing the social actor to a real dramatic event, that is connected to the character's growing up, the director provokes a reaction inside the protagonist and makes the audience wonder what Sara is thinking if really confronted with the act of birth. The whole scene is obviously recorded in a form of documentary observation due to the impossibility of controlling or staging such a real event. Indeed, the scene, as many others in the realm of observation, does not have an extensive length and it doesn't evolve. There are no multiple stages of the scene as the meeting scene (at minute 11).

In conclusion, despite the fact that *Stop the Pounding Heart* has concrete elements linking it to observational documentary, it cannot be inserted into such category since the scenes, discussed in the section 4.3, involve blocking and the performance of the social actors shows a high degree of control from the director, going much further from the usual reenactments or topic planting common in the field of documentary making.

5. Louisiana: The Other Side, a documentary with a fictionalized narrative

Louisiana: The Other Side (2015), is the first step of Roberto Minervini out of the Texan territories, and it represents one of his strongest documentary related works. This film can be identified as a hybridization of documentary with fiction, as much as the previous *Stop the Pounding Heart*, but in this film the presence of reality often overcomes the fictional elements³⁵. The principle of his cinema based on constructing an evolving narrative arc with his characters remain intact, but it can be seen a loosening of the fictional net to the point of giving stronger freedom to the protagonists up to the need of dividing unequally the film in two parts: the first one about Mark, a drug addict, and the second part about a paramilitary group³⁶. The two parts are linked thematically by the willingness of the protagonists to rebel against “unfair” social impoverishment or governmental injustices, turning the film into a more complex and partially collective portrayal of Southern society, moving away from a traditional story-driven film like *Stop the Pounding Heart*.

The film’s synopsis: “In an invisible territory at the margins of society lives a wounded community who face the threat of being forgotten by political institutions and having their rights as citizens trampled. Disarmed veterans, taciturn adolescents, drug addicts trying to escape addiction through love; ex-special forces soldiers still at war with the world; floundering young women and future mothers; and old people who have

³⁵ Taylor, K. (2016, June 10). The Other Side humanizes its reprobate protagonist, falters when he’s off-screen. *The Globe and The Mail*.
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/film-reviews/the-other-side-humanizes-its-reprobate-protagonist-falters-when-hes-off-screen/article30375994/>

³⁶ [Film at Lincoln Center]. (2016, May 12). *'The Other Side' Q&A | Roberto Minervini | Art of the Real* [Video]. Youtube.com.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMKrJqswndM&t=2s>

not lost their desire to live. Through this hidden pocket of humanity, renowned documentarian Roberto Minervini opens a window to the abyss of today's America.³⁷

5.1 The idea of the film

After *Stop the Pounding Heart*, Minervini wanted to continue his anthropological and human research of the unseen American South and found a fruitful ground in West Monroe Louisiana³⁸. The director said: "I never made a film [when] I didn't know the subjects first and this film [] is not an exception. Lisa, the female subject of the first part, is the aunt of the bull riders of my previous two films *Stop the Pounding Heart* and *Low Tide*. [] There are family ties there. [] When they invited me to film in the ghetto of Bawcomville I realized that the leitmotiv was anger³⁹".

To be able to create his traditional human bond to the characters, Minervini relocated to Louisiana for about a year.

What attracted the director to Lisa, Mark and the paramilitary was the fact of being representatives of typical phenomena happening, and labeling the social issues of the state of Louisiana.

5.2 The work with the social actors

Compared to *Stop the Pounding Heart*, whose original idea came from the director's vision, in *Louisiana: The Other Side* the social actors solicited him to show their world due to their appreciation of the faithful and sincere representation of their family members in the previous films.

³⁷ (n.d.). *The Other Side*. IMDB.

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4610244/plotsummary/?ref_=tt_ov_pl

³⁸ [Film at Lincoln Center]. (2016, May 12). *'The Other Side' Q&A | Roberto Minervini | Art of the Real* [Video]. Youtube.com.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMKrJqswndM&t=2s>

³⁹ Ibid

In the case of *Stop the Pounding Heart* initially Minervini wished to tell a male driven story about growing up as a Texan man. Indeed, the first chosen character was Sara's little brother who is shown in the film interacting with Colby⁴⁰. Although, subsequently the director opted for a more functional character, linked to a stronger narrative arc, who was already revealing signs of a true inner conflict: the dichotomy of faith and love of Sara. Already in this case the director decided to pay attention to the documentary reality, passing upon his personal wish in order to give more space to what the real world was ready to offer.

Louisiana: The Other Side was conceived even more on this philosophical line of self-determination. By reversing the director-characters dynamic of power, the center of the story was decided by the chosen social actors in an act of empowerment definitely stronger than the more vertical work done with Colby or Sara. One of the reasons for this partial shift of decisional power is due to the different self-awareness of the two age groups, respectively teenagers in *Stop the Pounding Heart* and adults in *Louisiana: The Other Side*. Although, the most relevant factor was the need of Minervini to more and more pass the baton to the characters, creating the most horizontal flow of work until this point in his career⁴¹. In this regard, the director followed rules of anthropological work similar to old masters of the field like Jean Rouch in documentaries like *Moi, un noir* (1958) or *The Mad Masters* (1954). By being a foreigner to Africa, Rouch decided to include the social actors in the process of developing the narrative creating a strong sense of self-representation in *I, a negro*.

Regarding the method of directing Minervini said: "The creative process involved all of us. Usually in the morning we had a meeting. We thought about what we could document by observation or reenactment and we

⁴⁰ [Jdylan131]. (2014, March 23). *Roberto Minervini - STOP THE POUNDING HEART* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsbsIYRUf54&t=270s>

⁴¹ [Film at Lincoln Center]. (2016, May 12). *'The Other Side' Q&A | Roberto Minervini | Art of the Real* [Video]. Youtube.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMKrJqswndM&t=2s>

worked almost algorithmically: if we want to go from A to B, is there some truth which would lead us there? Is there something you [the characters] want to bring on the table? Is it fiction or is it real? So they were really involved in the creative process.⁴²” This empowering and quite horizontal method of work, allowed Minervini to bring greater freedom and documentary elements, even through reenactments, into the film. The fictional net of the plot-driven story becomes a true collaboration between Minervini and the social actors.

At the same time, this methodology revealed its limits, influencing the film structure. Similarly to the previous film, the goal of Minervini was to achieve an intimate breakdown of the main character as the conclusive point of the story arc. Sara managed to reach that point of openness in the last confession with her mother on the last day of filming. On the other hand, Mark was struggling with more delicate issues like drug addiction and the subsequent label as a social outcast. So he decided not to continue with the filming when he eventually fell into the final crisis⁴³. The director’s ethics of empowerment, through which he managed to get very intimate and close to the social actors, did not permit to investigate further in the moment of a clear refusal from the social actor. In regards to the film structure, it can be assumed that the need for a second part of the film about the militias was an indirect consequence of this lack of an ending point to Mark and Lisa’s troubled story.

⁴² [Film at Lincoln Center]. (2016, May 12). *'The Other Side' Q&A | Roberto Minervini | Art of the Real* [Video]. Youtube.com.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMKrJqswndM&t=2s>

⁴³ Ibid

5.3 The film's analysis

Louisiana: The Other Side opens with a prologue scene of the militias dressed in military clothes preparing for a battle in the woods. This scene is quite mysterious since the audience do not know the characters and it has the only dramaturgical function to expose the world of the paramilitary group, central to the second part of the film. Without the prologue the narrative shift happening in the last 23 minutes of the film, moving from the story of Mark and Lisa to the militias would have felt out of context.

Entering into the part of the love story between the two protagonists Mark and Lisa, the bar scene (6:50) represents an initial point of intervention from the director who seems to have planted the phrase "I wish" as the core center of their conversation. The goal is to reveal their inner wishes, dreams that would later in the film become shattered. It is a directorial decision to work by contrast, enhancing the contradictions between their expectations and the sad reality. The scene is shot in a documentary framework and it does not require blocking since the social actors are quite static.



A frame of Mark and Lisa sharing the "I wish" game.

The camera is always close to them, managing to get different framings from a pair of simple positions. This fact confirms the documentary nature of the scene since staging is not required.

Generally, Minervini's approach to cinematography is marked by a strong principle of "freedom of movements" of the characters⁴⁴. According to the director's statements, social actors have to be able to move freely regardless of the fact that it could be inconvenient for the camera position or movement and lead to a disruption of the shot. This reversed hierarchy of importance, contrary to the principles of fiction cinema, where the actor has to move in favor of the camera, is created to allow the empowerment and free expression of the characters and it enhances the sense of realism even when the scene is a clear reenactment.

This principle is present in the way of filming since the fictional *Low Tide* and becomes most evident in the documentary *Louisiana*, where the social actors move almost entirely free of camera confinements, or sometimes

⁴⁴ [ICA]. (2022, August 2). *The Aesthetics of Framing: Roberto Minervini in conversation* [Video]. Youtube.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6yT9nFuZI&t=441s>

directions. Although, there can be found a number of exceptions to this rule in this last film when the need for staging and specific lighting is present.

This urge for stylization and therefore restriction of movement can be seen in the sex scene between Mark and Lisa (24:02). This is a clear example of lighting control, even though there are no moments of extreme “posterization” of characters or staticism as in the church scene of *Stop the Pounding Heart*. Probably due to their higher performative quality if compared to Sara and her sisters.

In the sex scene the bodies of the social actors move and perform in a manner which reminds of fiction cinema. Mark is clearly playing at a speed which is favorable for the camera, highlighting the director’s intention to just show “beautiful” cinematic moments of their lives. The lighting creates a nice chiaroscuro effect, not revealing much of the sex act, but still suggesting the intensity through the hunching over the shoulders of Mark. In the scene sensuality dominates as the result of a director’s form of staging.



A frame showing the stylized lighting conditions of the sex scene.

So, it can be said that when the director truly leaves the social actors free to express thanks to the fact of having favorable filming conditions for the cinematography, a true sense of documentary emerges. The contrary can be argued, when the director exaggerates control in order to get more cinematic, hence fictionalized scenes like the above-mentioned.

A scene which is the result of a clear reenactment, or fictional creation of the characters, is when Mark and his underage friend break into the elementary school (12:17). The director asked official permission to film inside the school. The acting being casual and the lack of fear from Mark, an ex-inmate who should fear legal repercussions, show that they were not at risk while entering the building.



The school scene shot showing a change of style in the film's cinematography .

The shot at minute (12:46) of the same scene shows the use of some sort of school cart to be able to follow the social actors in a fluid and stable way at low angle. This frame merges nicely into the cinematographic style, but it breaks with the classic handheld on the shoulder perspective which is the trademark of Diego Romero and Minervini.

Another directorial intervention can be noticed in the subsequent part of the scene (13:03). Minervini asked the social actors to share their opinions in front of the school papers hanging on the wall. Through a discussion about economics, Mark reveals that he is a drug dealer and exposes his condition of not being allowed to vote since he is an ex-felon. Here comes a relevant question of authenticity. Why would Mark explain to the underage boy such an obvious condition of his social status? Supposedly it is a known fact among drug consumers. In terms of documentary filmmaking, in this scene it seems that it was Minervini's wish to explain foreign audience about the situation of the ex-prisoners more than an organic need of the character. The explanatory function of the scene overshadows any sense of realism.

In opposition to reenactments, surely the highest point of documentary observation in *Louisiana: The Other Side* is reached in the confrontational scene (50:08) of Mark presenting to Lisa the plan of turning himself in after his mother's upcoming death in order to avoid overdosing. Even though it probably does not represent the full breakdown of Mark, as wished by Minervini, maybe including the police arrest, it is a true climatic scene and has a strong documentary quality. Indeed, the scene is filmed in a natural way. Evidence of this are the several jump cuts present in the editing, which pushes the narrative further in a conversation which has probably had an extensive length of filming due to the organic unfolding of topic and feelings. Mark's most emotional moment feels natural and it can be perceived in his body language a shyness to expose this less flattering side of his personality to the camera, which later in the filming led to his refusal to continue filming.

At the same time the scene, in terms of lighting or cinematography, reveals a positioning of the social actors to have favorable light on both of their faces. The chiaroscuro effect inside the character's trailer is oddly

perfect to be organic to that environment and it relates coherently with the dimmed lighting of the sex scene, also happening in the trailer.



A shot of the confrontation between Mark and Lisa showing the chiaroscuro effect of light.

On the contrary to the above-mentioned scene, a stretching of the boundaries of reality can be observed in the scene of the drunk men (18:12). After observing the group of elderly drinking and singing, the camera is found filming a young girl sitting on a pink child chair. Oddly, a man comes out of the frame overturning the chair, making the girl fall out and cry. Although the camera seems expecting this event to occur, hence being in a stable and almost static position framing the girl, it cannot be said that it was Minervini's intention for this act of bullying to happen. Although, it is likely caused by the empowering effect of the director's method, which here reveals its side effects. By asking the social actors to perform themselves to the camera, "flexing their muscles"⁴⁵, as Minervini says, he is indirectly encouraging moments of reality which would have

⁴⁵ [ICA]. (2022, August 2). *The Aesthetics of Framing: Roberto Minervini in conversation* [Video]. Youtube.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6yT9nfFuZI&t=441s>

otherwise not exist without the camera's presence. It can be said that while the camera was framing the girl, the drunk man acted irresponsibly in order to be the center of attention. Therefore, it surges organically the question of where is the limit of the director's encouragement, through his acceptance of also unhealthy behaviors, and where is the realm of observational reality. This directorial manipulation alters the social actors' conduct heading to unnecessary exaggeration and it opens up questions about ethics, especially when the characters are not in full control of their actions due to intoxications.

On multiple occasions the director shared publicly the need to rest and attend psychological therapy sessions for being an external observer of traumatic events that happened in the filming of *Louisiana: The Other Side*. "Sometimes Diego [Romero, the DOP] takes over during the shoot. Several times I make sure I don't go to the shoot because I am emotionally unfit to really be in control of the situation when I am emotionally overloaded. It happens all the time. I become an obstacle to the well being of everybody. I am usually not there for at least a couple of days a week and then it's Diego who takes over⁴⁶." Minervini said.

This statement opens up the question of who from the two crew members, director and DOP, is behind the directorial vision in the material used in the film, but it also confirms a state of unnecessary exposure of both the director and the viewer to ethically challenging scenes. Indeed, despite of the appreciation for the lack of judgment of the social actors, how many other moments of misconduct, or of ethical uncertainty, were deliberately taken out of the final edit to favor a likeability of the characters? Probably, Minervini's need to show empathy and share a likable version of his characters in Louisiana reached a point of distortion of reality.

⁴⁶ [ICA]. (2016, September 14). *Frames of Representation: The Other Side (Louisiana) Q&A* [Video]. Youtube.com. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cU_KpA9kn5Q&t=856s

For the first time in his cinema, the lack of control and share of decisional power meant paradoxically a perhaps bigger bending of reality than in the more fictionally controlled *Stop the Pounding Heart*.

The same criticism is present in the scene (27:04) of the pregnant stripper being injected with metamphetamines by Mark. Although we can assume that the woman has been an addict for some time, it can be questioned the role that the camera played in such a moment and the weak function of it in terms of dramaturgy. The classic explanation of Minervini about intimacy and sharing horizontally with the social actors, does not stand on this scene. The privilege of the director of being an external observer, while maintaining safe social conditions, makes it hard to believe in the wish of some of the side characters to freely share their most sensitive fragments of life with the film crew.

Generally speaking, there is a sense of overcompensation in the characters' representation in order to achieve sure likeability. The bad social conditions seem to be sugarcoated by gestures of niceness or extreme delicacy, probably with the intent to enhance the viewer's often struggling empathy for the protagonists. Mark is frequently shown sharing hugs and intimacy with most of the people he interacts with in the film. An example of it can be seen in the scene when Mark meets his mother (43:44). The scene starts with Mark putting a flower over her ear.



The starting shot of the above-mentioned scene.

And it continues with them walking slowly hand in hand in the yard. There is a perceivable sense of exaggeration in the show of affection between the two. The same feature can be seen both in the later scene when Mark encounters his grandmother (53:15), which could feel realistic, but also when Mark hugs the pregnant stripper (28:09) right after drugging her.



The ending shot of where Mark hugs the stripper.

Overall *Louisiana* shows a fragmented use of stories and characters, creating a not always functional mix of narratives. For example the younger boy of the previously discussed scene where he and Mark break into the school can be found also at a later scene (42:16). He is attending a Veterans commemoration and observes the whole ceremony without interacting with the attendees. Directing-wise he is being treated as a standing figurine to show the audience the military ceremony in order to show the importance that the army has in such a Southern world. The scene dramaturgically works as an anticipation of the second part of the film about the militias, but the character's development is rather poor and ends up fragmenting unnecessarily the leading narrative arc of Mark and Lisa.

A similar criticism can be applied to one of the last scenes of the film about the music festival (1:11:19) which exposes a fragmented characterless portrayal of the Lousianan party culture and its derogatory extremisms. The scene is a high point of documentary observation in the film, but editing wise it is splitting in two parts the "chapter" about the paramilitary group creating a strange effect of disorientation. The previous scene shows the rhetoric and militaristic propaganda of the militias and it has a rather serious tone which clashes with the party feeling of the following scene. Even though it is clear the intention of Minervini to bring the film into the realm of documentary depiction of Southern society in all its aspects, it lacks cohesion in its formal approach to narration.

Conclusion

In the attempt to give an answer to the crucial role of documentary and fictional elements in Minervini's cinema, after the thesis analysis, it can be confirmed that the documentary elements became progressively stronger and more present in the latest films of his career due to the director's urgent need to give more expressive freedom to the characters and let reality emerge and flow through the fictional nets set by him. These nets allowed the director to aim at a clear narrative structure, which is often challenging to obtain in documentaries, but the rigidity of these nets was loosened gradually from *Low Tide*, to *Stop the Pounding Heart* and finally in *Louisiana: The Other Side*. This increasingly stronger approach to reality was the result of Minervini's growing confidence in the social actor's skills and needs to self-represent themselves by determining their own personal narratives. Although, this self-determination approach never reached the level of full anthropological research as in Jean Rouch's documentaries due to Minervini's strong influence of his style, voice and themes. Furthermore, in no analyzed film it can be seen a pure observational approach which does not include at least a minimum use of lighting or high control of the image composition.

Louisiana: The Other Side represents the highest involvement of the director with observation diminishing the use of blocking and exploring characters' social context beyond the more traditional fictionalized and controlled approach to story of *Stop the Pounding Heart*.

Generally, the fictionalizing style constitutes Minervini's iconic language and trademark as a cinema author. His directing method varies from scene to scene and there can be identified a few exemplary cases defining his

directing: the first one is the use of a topic to be unfolded in a discussion (see the scene of the school conversation in *Louisiana* page#39), common practice in the observational documentaries. The second case is the completely fictional staging of scenes where characters become fully controlled elements of Minervini's vision (see the church scene of *Stop the Pounding Heart* page#23). The two other types of cases present in the analyzed films are: either the truthful documentary observation of reality as it is (see the festival party scenes of *Louisiana* page#45), where a no intervention approach is used, especially in the collective scenes, or the use of blocking with clear instructions on how to perform obtaining a blending of fiction and documentary (see the meeting scene of Colby and Sara in *Stop the Pounding Heart* page#16), where out of a fictional setting, documentary elements emerged in the evolution of the scene, but under pre-established dynamics defined by the director.

At the same time it can be said that these four cases of directing methods are often mingled making it harder to define the exact directing nature of each scene.

To sum, in terms of social actor's performances it can be argued that they play versions of themselves in a manner which resembles more fiction cinema than people's natural behavior or movements. Therefore, it confirms a certain level of directorial training or directives. It is not causality that all of the three analyzed films share a very analogous rhythm, delicacy and have similarities in the social actors' performances, an unexisting element in documentaries. Indeed, the characters talk often softly, never on top of each other and in every scene they seem to start and end with the same emotion. There are no high and low points in the acting, but a constant continuous flow. It can be hardly experienced a sudden change in their feelings in any of these films, independently from their more fictional or documentary nature.

Also the consistency of the cinematic language and camera operating reveals a degree of fictionalization in order to achieve such a high quality of photography, narration and editing throughout Minervini's cinema.

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