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Qualifying Exam Part 2  
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Question 1: Discuss the role of voice overall in both documentary cinema and creative nonfiction, including how it is shaped, formed and its impact on the audience/reader and your understanding of voice within your own project.

And the truth of your experience can *only* come through in your own voice. If it is wrapped in someone else's voice, we readers will feel suspicious, as if you are dressed up in someone else's clothes. You cannot write out of someone else's dark place; you can only write out of your own.

Anne LaMott, *Bird by Bird* - pg 199

*I speak about them to you.*

Bill Nichols, pg 13

Let's talk about voice. Voice establishes relationships, reveals mood or tone, can crush or build credibility, develop or deny authenticity, enable or disable trust and inform levels of intimacy and vulnerability. Voice inhabits both literary and verbal space, establishes point of view, experience, responsibility and accountability. But most importantly, a strong voice is an identifying force in the nebulous spectrum of transformative possibilities found in documentary and nonfiction. Voice will make you laugh, make you cry and everything in between. A strong and true voice compels documentary and nonfiction to do more than help viewers and readers pass time, they must "demand our active engagement, challenging (us) to think about what (we) know, how (we) know it and what (we) might want to learn" (Bernard 3).

I'm listening to Anne LaMott voice by reading and re-reading her well-worn and well-loved *Bird by Bird*, hearing her voice as I read her words and attempt to facilitate

them into my vocal, albeit language-based launching pad. I more than understand writing and creating texts from my own dark and scary place, of wearing my own often ill-fitting clothing, mine nonetheless. It's present, it's now, I am in it and I wear little to nothing; my tone, always light, belies my uncertainty in this get-up. You'll hear it my shifts in pitch, quasi-shaky transitions, read it in the shape of my structure. Over my head, deeply submerged underwater and yet from here I emerge and climb aboard this big ship to embark on a new adventure of essay-writing proportions. Then, diving in, over and over, into unknown and uncharted territories, new books, new sources, new things I'm passionately drawn to -- my Jacques Coustuea-ian mission reveals more than a surprise or two or ten.

In writing about writing, voice and the creative process, I'm convinced nothing could feel more fearsome, fantastic, uncertain, abstract than this right now. Because I am not an academic, yet I fake it everyday, jump head first into shark-infested waters with a smile and no shame in my beachwear. Meaning, analysis, understanding and communication, for me, can be found in the performance, the act and art of faking and making, of doing, of finding yourself and plunging onward, connecting with your environment, upward or deeper into the task at hand; this is where voice is found, shaped, and honed. A hybrid blend of acting, of role-playing and stage presence, of messing with the constructs of academic writing, and with both respect and disdain, a break from form and rules, using the oft scorned "I" when I'm not supposed to, continuing to be reckless and ruthless with my words, thoughts and arguments; it's a no doubt high-stakes diving game of textual construction, drawn from the inevitable and undeniable influences of race, class and gender, my upbringing, beliefs, ethics, morals.

Finding my voice amidst all these unsheddable facets of self is like keeping the water out of my lungs, my eyes, my heart. But I return to safety, to my little ship built with blocks of concrete, wit and spit with a new sense of voice the more I delve into the waters of revelation.

How do I, how do they/we/us stay heads-up in such depths? Robin Hemley once critiqued my creating nonfiction writing and said, “don’t do tricks, but go for the kill while you have them laughing, and you have us laughing in the face of tragedy.” That sounded really great to me, but how does that help me keep my little vessel of unlikely and incongruent materials afloat in a vast ocean of criticism, theories and validity? How do I tread the water and muck and yuck? By laughing in the face of tragedy, by not trying to trick the impending, threatening, capsizing abyss but by taking my persona and the assertion of my self in the text and my little gift of laughter, and sometimes, sometimes, I’m not all that funny. In essence, I fake it with voice, and you do too.

Note to self: Behold the mighty power of voice in both written and visual texts! And, yes, awkward shifts of narrative and verb tense! Embrace your inability to subscribe to a high-end elite form of writing for those in the know! Let your personality shine through the text using metaphor and prolific examples! Cross your fingers in every attempt to stay true and clear with your words to convey your meaning. Un-cross your fingers and continue to write, edit, write, edit and repeat! In this process, hone your voice as it “is what is really at stake in modernity, the voice as specific substance of language everywhere triumphantly pushed forward” (Barthes 175). And, never, ever forget to weave a story and breathe a narrative to life, no matter what your subject may

be, as you plummet the sea of discourse in shark protective scuba gear known only as...research.

So I research voice by reading and listening, and ward off impending peril the size of BP's Gulf oil spill. Not only thinking about spoken voice and the way it sounds aurally, (the way my great-aunt Olga's thick Hungarian-accented English sounds as I interview her) but the presentation of voice as persona as an author of an within a text and how voice is *heard* through both written, visual and verbal language forms regardless of levels of authorial presence. And I've realized that this oscillating scope of voice and persona is perhaps why they operate as signature foundations of text, and most notably, those of the nonfiction realm, regardless of subject matter. This is not hyperbole. This I believe, is fact - an arguable, but undeniable fact. One listen to *This American Life*, and the literal voice and persona of Ira Glass, the pleasure you hear in his voice as he interviews people or comments on the subject matter at hand translates over the airwaves like a great time with old friends. I want to have the same effect with my work, the clear and obvious joy resonating in my presentations of things that are real and real to me that Glass oozes. You can hear his smile. In *TAL*, story is both told to you from a reporter/interviewer who shapes form with questions, establishes levels of reportage through honesty, integrity, and believability, but in that sense, story is also created by those who are part of the narrative, those being interviewed, those telling. In radio, of course, voice is the vehicle of communication and with *This American Life*, the audience is exposed to a cacophony of authorial voices that don't simple tell a story, but share and invite you into a real experiences and events.

Voice and persona come in many shapes and sizes. Whether overt, snarky, in-your-face, full of lies, breathy and barely audible, whether expository, distant, ever-present, omniscient, shifting in tone and pitch and cadence, showing up in literature, news, cinema, radio, music, out of context, both in-and-out of the body - voice is an inescapable authorial aspect of both written and visual art forms. These variant degrees of voice and persona, however, are the crux of debate for this essay, indeed, the debate raging within myself as a writer and creator of nonfiction texts wherein voice and persona are, in fact, my silent screaming signature.

Signature: I love this term. It works. "Every documentary has its own distinct voice. Like every speaking voice, every cinematic [and literary] voice has a style or 'grain' all its own that acts like a signature" (Nichols, 99). The stamp, the mark, the unavoidable trace of the author found in every text whether or not one believes in the postmodern idea of the the death of the author. Elbow asserts that when "critics kill off the author, they merely inject new life into voice: the text is nothing *but* voices" (211). The presentation of authorial voice in text, then, if thought of as a signature or series of recognizable strokes, includes many decisions about what to leave in, what to leave out, how close to focus in on details, how much parsimony to embark upon - in short, editorial work, the donning of attire, engaged in even before the creative act.

"To put it in rhetorical terms, every author creates an ethos or a persona on the page, sometimes openly present in the text, sometimes tactfully transparent, but always part of the appeal to the reader" (Root, 180). Voice, then, in it's truest and most pure sense, is embedded, indeed weaved in the text in spite of itself and whether or not it reveals itself in implicit or explicit ways. And with this, true authorial voice is always

keenly sensed by the reader/audience in whatever form or force it takes - mute, overt, somewhere in between? Author-killer Barthes' similarly asserts a voice/reader relationship, "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up the writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes, 148).

Voice is a force with both origin and destination, as there are always two authors of a text: "the implied author as it were in the text and the actual historical author as it were behind the text" (Elbow 224). As such, my dual position as a writer and a consumer of a variety of nonfiction texts, my constant challenge and goal is to assert my own creative persona, the "me" of this text. I am peppered throughout my analysis and study of voice, like a meta-nonfiction, because what we have here is not only a look at voice and its different levels and manifestations in nonfiction, but also because this exercise is inherently about me and my work, and my discoveries of the "synchronicities in connections" (Root, 32) as I play in the murky dualistic dark space of writing and researching this essay, indeed, the entire playground of intertext and interdisciplinarity.

Peter Elbow insists that discussion of voice is controversial, yet a necessary term in discussion of texts. He provides a theoretical three-part framework to distinguish different aspects of voice upon which I shape and work with my discussion of voice and persona in both visual and literary forms of nonfiction in written prose and documentary cinema<sup>1</sup>.

1. Audible Voice: how much do we *hear* the text as we read [and see] it?

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<sup>1</sup> The use of brackets indicates my own insertions concerning visual documentary. The use of parentheses are Elbow's.

2. Dramatic Voice: what kind of speaker or writer is implied in the text (and how vividly)?
3. One's Own Voice: What is the relation of the text to actual writer [creator]?

So the question is, how do Elbow's ideas of voice show up in specific examples that shape and inform my work and how do they help me understand the development and construction of my own authentic voice as I traverse mediums? Consider all the variations of voice found in both documentary and nonfiction. First, who is speaking, what kind of narrator do we have? First person, second person, third? Is the voice of the narrator, the speaker/writer omniscient, expository, unemotional and voice-of-god-like as presented in the documentary film *King*, where we hear and see Tom Brokaw, a pillar of news integrity with his removed, anchor-style narration. All things newsy (Fox Channel included) and traditionally journalistic, adhere to a fairly strict third-person style, the inverted pyramid implemented to exact a detached method of reporting facts and events with little to no commentary beyond the obvious. We see this in *King* with Brokaw's descriptions of his life, down to the fatal and tragic shooting of Dr. King. Brokaw might call use the word "tragic" in his serious, formidable tone, but that's where his emotional voice truncates and is silenced by journalistic persona.

In *King*, like many other documentaries that emphasize the "impression of objectivity" (Nichols 107) and a well-supported argument or linear, historical narrative, I find the same voice in many of the historical nonfiction texts I've read to learn about the monarchs, industry, economics, politics, and social specifics of Hungary. The unemotional, distanced, removed, expository voice can not only be found in traditional

news writing or other social and political visual texts but in prose like Laszlo Kontler's *A History of Hungary* or Paul Lendvai's *The Hungarians: A Thousand Years of History in Defeat*. Compelling reads, indeed, but the voice in these texts, like the signature voice of Brokaw or of the historical, journalistic or factual investigative authors, audible but detached, dramatic but removed, reports truths, facts, mostly in a linear fashion and do so with little nuance in persona, no insertion of the "I," no internal evaluation or response. These expository, historical texts reveal an audible voice that we hear and trust for its unsentimental representation of events, usurping drama for fact and implying a more removed and attempted objective relationship to the material presented.

While exposition and storytelling are integral parts of documentary and nonfiction, a contrast to the remote, journalist tone of voice found in the aforementioned works appears in the documentary films by Werner Herzog and Michael Moore, to name a few, and who are two filmmakers that influence my work because of their presence in the texts and their ways of commenting on the world through the actions, events and subjects they report on. Herzog's English, heavy with a German-accent and inescapable Euro-ennui is both captivating and distancing as he reports with poetic expressionism on both people and places that romanticizes their lives lived on borders, fringes and extremes. He questions the motivations and desires of those who break from traditional molds, folding in his own existential and thoughtful commentary on humanity and his understanding of being in the world. Whether reporting on the life of Timothy Treadwell in *Grizzly Man*, or the folks who escape from one extreme to another in *Encounters at the End of the World*, Herzog weaves his own thoughts, voice and persona in his representation of people and places that push boundaries, and does so

by continually asserting himself in his text as both narrator, critic and praiser of their fascinating lives.

Similarly, Moore, who's persona looms as large as he does on screen, portrays himself as "a socially conscious nebbish who do whatever is necessary to get to the bottom of pressing social concerns" (Nichols, 14). The participatory presence of Herzog and Moore in their films reveals sides of themselves as well, indeed, while their films' focus on a specific subject matter, they are notably incredibly autobiographical, particularly Moore's *Roger and Me* and Herzog's *My Best Fiend*. Consider as well, a text that is written and visual, such as the graphic novel *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. Like Herzog and Moore, her presence is in the foreground, as she weaves an autobiographical tale of her life in Iran, political and social strife and injustice, conflict with family and self, using illustrated images much like shots in film to expand and enhance her nonfiction narrative. Subsequently adapted into a feature-length animated film, crossing medium, the text remains nonfiction and documentary precisely because of its themes which are similar to the themes found in my upcoming work in progress, and for its powerful insertion of Satrapi's voice and persona. The voices of these authors are distinct, prevalent and lend to develop an incredibly intimate relationship between the text and the authorial voice that transfers directly to the engagement of the reader/audience. Unavoidably, we hear, see and form our own relationship with the personas and voices in these texts. We learn as much about their topics as we do about the authors/directors by their active participation and presentation of self.

On the other end of the spectrum, we may encounter the phenomena when "the real author and his or her intentions are invisible, [but] that doesn't mean they are

unknowable” (Elbow 224). Sometimes voice and persona are not heard or seen at all, nearly imperceptible, but still present and knowable, as seen in the films of Frederick Wiseman, where his fly-on-wall observational camera serves only to record events as they unfold with zero commentary from a narrator or overt authorial presence. We never see or hear Wiseman, the director of *Titticut Follies*, *Model*, *High School* and a score of other observational documentary films, but rather the authorial voice appears in his films through his editorial choices, his framing, choice of camera lens, his narrative decisions and story construction, subject matter and placement of shots with the temporality of the films he constructs. Wiseman’s films are suggested to be closer in spirit to New Journalism (Grant, 30) in that his films, often thought of as “reality fictions” are not unlike the idea of the “nonfiction novel.” Indeed, like Wiseman’s sense of his films as “a natural history of the way we live,” Tom Wolfe asserted that the function of New Journalism was to chronicle “the way people are living now” (Grant, 31). The similarities between Wiseman’s films and the New Journalists rings through in their choice of reporting through embedded observation. Their relationship to the texts is both immersed and distanced, resulting in representations of events and people that is somewhat un-tampered with and unaltered until the application of the editorial process. In this post-production, post-research, data collection state, voice is carefully and craftily embedded - not overtly present, but in no ways erased or invisible.

With so many influences, discussions, presentations and different aspects of voice and persona found in documentary and nonfiction, and no matter how honest one thinks they are being in their representation of a subject, persona always exists.

There are always versions of the “self” contained in the text, and “we always have a choice of which ‘author’ to emphasize, the real author or the implied author: which dimension of the text to attend to, the ‘behindness’ or the ‘in-ness’” (Elbow 224). A powerful documentary or nonfiction author manipulates this in both literary and visual senses and allows the audience to wonder and wander along with them. Knowing this, one writer that resonates closely with me and my dissertation project is David Shields’ and his *Enough About You, Notes Toward the New Autobiography*. Both appealing and significant in terms of signature, voice and persona of the author, he not only discusses his own writing process but weaves the narrative in such a way that we are seamlessly brought into his world of the creative process, self-reflection and confession, his exploration of himself as a damned, “doomed character” (Shields 6). He invites an intimate connection with his flawed self through his own reflective and satirical voice and we learn, in fact, we are encouraged to write and create in our own voice, to be and become our own subject. He writes that his collection of autobiographical essays is “not only an autobiographical book but a book about the impulse to write autobiographically, to turn oneself into one’s subject...Here, in other words, is how I give you me. Here, also, is how I give you you. Here, finally, is how you give me me” (Shields 6-7).

With all this giving going on, this love-fest of Shields’, the sentiments and suggestions behind his ideas reverberate within me like a sonic boom. I feel as though I’ve been thrown a life vest, lent a helping hand as I embark upon both an autobiographically driven, memoir-infused, historically based creative nonfiction/ documentary hybrid of my travels to Hungary and my attempts to uncover and construct the often tragic story of my family, my Hungarian ancestry and the effects of war,

displacement and loss that surround us. I connect with Shields', originally a fiction writer, as he breaks from his genre of choice, just as I am, and as he finds his voice and presents a series of essays that reveal the process of finding his authorial voice, and that his discoveries along the way "make the case that the only real journey is deeper inside and the only serious subject is the mystery of identity - mine, especially, but yours, too, I promise" (Shields 7). This gives me both permission and incentive to continue the process of investigating my ancestral and cultural identity, of over-coming all the crashing waves and the voyage of the unknown, of connecting with the past through explorations in the present, of challenging myself beyond my medium-specific comfort zone, to commit to developing a nonfiction work that is a representation of the real in my voice, no one else's. No tricks, no gimmicks, just me knowing that it's okay to insert myself in the text, indeed, it is the only truth I might ever find. It is me wearing my own clothes and being comfortable listening to my own voice, but more importantly, of being comfortable and confident in sharing it with you.

With my new found strength and sea-legs, a strong spine built of research and a desire to both share and tell, I continue this adventure of developing my own voice and inserting my persona in both my written and visual texts because "voice is one of the main forces that draws us into texts" (Elbow 232). I will get over the fact that I loathe my documentary footage shot in Budapest in 2008 only because of my perception of self - a once chubby reporter, nervous on camera, fumbling for words to describe the amazing experiences and treasures I found while investigating my family's history. I could never go back and recreate this, and supposing I did so, would usurp authenticity for something false, to appease my silly lack of confidence, pander to my own ideas of

perfection in a counter-productive way that silences the voice of not only who I was then, but who I am now. Forget being perfect, for “Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people...perfectionism will ruin your writing, blocking inventiveness and playfulness and life force” (LaMott 28). Imperfection, but a strong voice, is where the invisible author may sweep in and shape story through invisible art of editing, through discovery, through messiness. Further exposure to films, books, articles, oral history, essays and news also help me gain strength in my work, shape and form my voice as I constantly try to apply Elbow’s concepts to my texts. Is it scary, sure. But it’s mine, my mission, so back in I dive. This is my signature, this is my voice - audible, dramatic and forever immersed in the tissue of my text.

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