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## My Characters. Reflections of a Documentary Film Director

### KEY WORDS

character, protagonist, documentary, documentarian, shooting, film production, film director, plausibility of behavior, director-protagonist relations

### ABSTRACT

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The author, being a documentary film director, analyzes an important part of a documentarian's work – relations with characters. She describes this unique kind of a bond that develops between a director and his or her protagonists. The process of coming closer to characters is investigated in detail and the strategies of gaining the characters' trust are named. The issues what problems the director experiences on the way and how they can be solved are addressed. The questions of the director's responsibility regarding the characters and unexpected provocations on their side, as well as of mutual protagonist-director influence are brought up. All matters referred to in this article are illustrated by examples from the director's professional life.

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I graduated from Academy of Arts, film directing department, twenty-two years ago. Somehow all these years have passed so quickly that it seems just a moment separates me, a student, from myself, a lecturer. Having students helps a director sometimes because when you think a lecture over, some chaotic and isolated things in your head inevitably need to be systematized. I started considering what I have besides documentaries and some professional skills that these young people don't. One thing I know for sure – the characters of my films.

It is a very special sphere of a documentarian's profession. The protagonists exist not only as concrete people in the outside world but, at the same time, as

some permanent immaterial presence in my conscience. Some time ago they used to transfer to 35mm film, now they do to video and, simultaneously, they become an integral part of my personal experience. They stay even when the production of the film is over. I already have got many of them and, yet, I remember them all very well. Some strange and interesting things are connected with the fact I have characters.

For the most part, while thinking of them, I feel gratitude. It is a unique bond, between me and them. As a director, for some time I get the right to “make them mine”. I can meet them regularly. We can do something together, travel together, while I can ask them questions no polite person would ask a stranger. For me at that moment they are not strangers any more. They feel it and inwardly move towards me, coming a bit closer, close or very close, it depends...

It all starts often long before a film is in production. Sometimes you find a subject yourself, you are its author and, accordingly, the protagonists are selected by you. Now and then some other person writes a script and later you are given the subject together with the characters you do not know. It is a risky business. However, making a film would be risky anyway, even if you are going to shoot on the topic you have been dreaming about all your life. It is more or less clear how to proceed if you start working on “your own” subject. It means you have already done some selection work and probably got the consent of the people you are going to shoot. With “someone else’s” topic it is more complicated. You apparently need work and, if the subject more or less satisfies you, you agree and suddenly you have to deal with someone else’s ideas and absolutely unknown people. Surprisingly, at that stage a little miraculous transformation takes place. A protagonist or protagonists of your future film might yet not know about you at all but you start getting a special feeling about them. The fact of them becoming your characters changes everything. You now think about them as of someone you know. You research. The feeling that dominates you at the moment is interest that you feel towards your characters. It is funny but this feeling does not depend on the fact, whether the character is alive or long dead, being a historic figure from the past.

(What is more, for me it all functions the same way even with the characters that are initially filmed by another director. Sometimes I write scripts for my husband (also a film director) Victor Asliuk or assist him with making his films in any other way. In this case I cannot help “appropriating” his characters as

well. I just need to interact with them somehow and it happens as a matter of fact. Then I eagerly volunteer to communicate with them, to carry out an interview or criticize Victor for his strategies in dealing with them.)

In this way you are “tuned” to your protagonists in the very beginning, as if you somehow get into invisible contact with them even before meeting them personally and starting shootings.

Then comes the next stage – interest turns into fear. First of all, the fear to cope with the film. Doubts start attacking you. You have to come up with an approach to the subject and visualize the future film in your head clearly. Usually, it does not happen or happens not to the extent you expect it to be. You consider all possible variants of the “key” you are going to use to tell the story but most methods seem to be too trivial to adopt, whereas the best option refuses to come to your mind. Not rarely you start blaming your characters for this. You are aware that they do not justify your hopes about them. They are too primitive, not deep enough, not so bright personalities, less artistic than you want them to be and have little or nothing to tell... It might be partially true but it is also true that you easily make them responsible for your lack of imagination and stereotyped thinking.

Then the other fear automatically joins the first one. You are afraid for the characters themselves. For example, it seems logical to plan some episodes that are hard for the protagonist to bear. The burden of director’s responsibility can be heavy. At the same time, if you are, as a director, extremely delicate, cautious and deadly against any risks, you have nothing to do in this profession.

In my film *Amateur Filmmaker* I took my eighty-year-old protagonist Anatol Schneider up a high forest hill. It was not that he was against, on the contrary, he volunteered but he was not sure how his organism would react to such an ascent, so he feared a bit. I had combed all the paths up the hill beforehand and found the most sloping one. To kill my pangs of conscience once and for all I had taken his pressure meter with us before we started. As a result, nothing bad happened and I had a nice final scene, both visually and in content. In other case my protagonist, 131-cm in height artist Victor Zalacilin, was sitting in the grass for a long time watching the sunset. Time and again he had done that regularly without me, in summer, on the longest day of the year, but usually he had spent not so much time on the spot since the place had always been swarmed with hungry mosquitoes. To let the crew do their job demanded more time and I was fascinated by his firm masculine posture in the twilight, him, being stung all over

but somehow invulnerable at the same time. This episode was not included in the film in the end, it turned out to be too banal.

Probably the greatest fear I experienced was for my protagonist Andrew Nikalaeu, a bedridden young man, who due to his indomitable activity had been through an accident, which left him doomed to heavy disability forever. Yet, something unexpected had happened to him later on. Some things had become revelation, like his national identification, religious and historical mysteries and, above all, writing poems. Through love of poetry he had met a healthy girl with unbelievably beautiful hair and a perfect figure. She had got interested in him so much that ignored her mother's tearful begging and married Andrew. When I got to know him, he wanted to accomplish something extraordinary. Actually, a parachute jump. He was eager to be in the film but his wife was too worried about him to let him do this leap. I was nervously waiting for their decision. At last, she agreed but my own worries started then. What if something horrible happens? As a rule, even risen from his bed and put into a wheel-chair Andrew had fainted for some minutes. After all, he jumped with a parachute and I guess afterwards I was more relieved and euphoric than they both.

However, this feeling comes very rarely whereas other emotions more often. As a documentarian, you are a very dependent person. You depend on your characters very much. Without their readiness not only to participate in the film but also open up in front of the camera nothing serious will come out of the plan. Still, there are no ideal characters. At any production stage they may unpleasantly surprise you. For example, they demand money for being filmed. The argument you are immediately adducing that your project is non-commercial and a low- or no-budget production changes nothing. Even if you agree to this condition, you can hear, "Only when you have paid, I'll do what you ask of me", and it makes you very sad because it spoils everything. Even if you pay people for shootings, you need more humane relations with your protagonist. At the same time, as a professional you have to see his point of view, accept such a behavior and do not let it become an obstacle in dealing with your character, what is really hard, I have to admit.

Fortunately, it happens rarely and most people are ready to invest their time for free. Nevertheless, with them you can experience difficulties of another kind. My protagonist of the film *Master*, a very talented inventor, who was making exclusive wooden clocks and musical instruments, had his own problems during our shootings that had nothing to do with the film at all. They piled up having

made him extremely irritable and uncooperative. Moreover, once he could not control himself and just threw me out of his house. He claimed I broke our agreement, although we were going to shoot an absolutely usual scene, which he had earlier fully approved. At this moment of crisis my crew, all males, got scared and instantly retreated having left me in the predicament alone. It is a part of our profession to be always ready to an ordeal. Indignant as I was, I had to suppress my anger, resentment and humiliation and to settle the affair at whatever cost. It was just the beginning of production, I had yet almost no footage and the film needed to be finished anyway. And I gradually succeeded. It is not that easy to turn a director out... Of course, later on in my hotel room I was crying hysterically, cursing my job and pitying myself, so tactful and clever, for having been treated so unfairly for no fault at all.

After such outbursts some minor occurrences, like petty deception cases, are not that unsettling. You just feel disappointed and sigh. Together with the abovementioned master I was patiently waiting for his wife's return from China to film their emotional meeting. He had nothing against... About her coming back I got to know from him after she had been home for three days already. Initially he had told me the wrong date.

Now and then on shootings you have a reason to fear for yourself. When I got to know my very first character Leanid (Lyonia) Levin of my first film *Leanid Levin. The War and love*, I was afraid I would not be taken seriously enough. Levin had been a cult figure in Belarusian architecture. He got the Lenin's prize in 1970, which was, as he put it, "not even a dream but something more". Besides being a prominent architect, he was a well-known public figure as well, the Chairman of Belarusian Jewish Community. Back then I thought if Levin had known that it was my first film, he would have disobeyed me and would have dictated me what to do. So I made efforts to hide the fact of my inexperience. Levin turned out to be a very cultivated person whereas I made a good showing of myself, so very soon we had an excellent rapport. My cameraman betrayed me involuntarily when he wanted to praise me in front of Levin, "Such a nice film and it is her directing debut!" Levin was surprised while I was very angry with my careless colleague. Though, it was not such a disaster after all, since it happened after Levin complemented the finished film already.

However, sometimes the events on shootings take an unexpected turn long before you have completed work successfully. Once I was really horrified. I was filming a distinguished person, the former Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of

Belarusian Soviet Socialistic Republic Stanislau Shushkevich. In general, it was a position of a presidential rank. In 1991 Stanislau Shushkevich initiated a meeting on the highest level in Belarusian Belavezha Forest, where the leaders of Russian and Ukrainian Soviet Republics arrived. As a result, the Belavezha Agreements were signed by three parties, according to which the Soviet Union ceased to exist and Belarus (like Russia and Ukraine) received independence. Making a film about Stanislav Shushevich, such an important figure in Belarusian history, I took him to Belavezha forest.

Not far from that place another character of ours lived. It was an illiterate old peasant Mikalaj Tarasiuk. He was the only inhabitant of a deserted village in the woods. Grieving over lost of traditional life and all his neighbours he turned to carving little figures out of wood, recreating the world he had once had. For some decades he had made hundreds of compositions representing all possible kinds of agricultural work and all possible scenes showing human relations. The wooden collection with its unique naïve style had become a national phenomenon. One of the compositions depicted the signing of Belavezha Agreements and it showed Tarasiuk's critical attitude to the politicians who did that. They looked comical.

My husband Victor Asliuk and I had been very fond of old Tarasiuk and come to shoot him for Victor's films for five years. So I decided to visit the old man together with Stanislav Shuskevich, what we did. Of course, I had not told Tarasiuk beforehand who his new guest was. As usual, Tarasiuk was friendly and talkative. He even happened to criticize the events in Belavezha Forest resulting in the fall of the Soviet Union. He also brought up some piquant details about this fateful meeting that presented the Belarusian leader of that time in a very unfavourable light. At that moment Shushkevich confessed who he was... The old man was taken aback but for a very short time. He immediately gained his composure back. He had an artistic spontaneous nature and was a free spirit, full of dignity. So the presence of an outstanding public figure in his territory was not a reason at all to feel shy or confused. After a lively talk he suggested they should both go and have a look at Tarasiuk's small distillery hidden in the open air among bushes. Shushkevich, an open-minded and intelligent man, agreed. There it happened. I could not foresee the old man would be so inventive. At first, he just showed Shushkevich the equipment, non-assembled at that time. Then he started imitating as if he was really going to produce homemade vodka at that exact moment. He began to connect pipes and asked Shushkevich to help

him. A polite person, Shushkevich did not protest and held the pipes. I felt awkward and started sweating. Tarasiuk had no malicious intent. He was just a creative soul in a joyful mood. For some minutes he was busy by the distiller. Then he started acting as if he was in the process of distillation while I was desperately thinking what I could do in the circumstances. Nothing dawned on me. So the cameraman and I were pretending we were not here but somewhere far away... The old man found a very dirty, all in soil, pot, brought it to the “cock” and “poured” out “vodka” in it. He imitated drinking and then gave the pot to Shushkevich also “to try”. I started to feel dizzy. A person of his rank, an acknowledged physician, famous university professor and, on top of everything, the former president of the country in such an outrageous situation because of me! As if it all was not enough, the host pretended to be completely drunk and invited Shushkevich to dance... I felt I was going to faint. At that moment I was sure Shushkevich would damn me forever and never let approach him again. Fortunately, he didn't... In the end, I suggested to the old artist he should go and have a real drink with his guest and at last that helped to distract him...

I still have this strange footage. I do not dare to use it...

Some tricks the characters play on you seem to be not an intentional demonstration but a logical manifestation of their character. Once for my film *Unpardoned* I was shooting Siarhej Khanzhankou, a born dissident, who in 1963, being a twenty-year-old Minsk student, organized a small protest group of four to undermine the Soviet regime. The only action they managed to plan was to blow up a huge notoriously famous jammer-tower in the centre of Minsk. Back then it had been jamming BBC and The Voice of America stations. One of the four hot heads turned out to be a KGB informer. He had been telling the organs about all movements of the organization. So long before the preparation for the explosion was finished, Siarhej Khanzhankou and his two other colleagues were arrested. He had had served his ten-year imprisonment term in a Gulag in full. I met him some years ago. He was about seventy but his fighting spirit had not changed a bit. Being still active, he was looking for some measures to preserve memories of the horrors of the Soviet times. It was too radical for modern Soviet-spirited Belarus. Khanzhankou had written a letter to Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs suggesting an interesting idea – to open a Repression Museum in Minsk, the subject not presented in Belarusian museums at all. As far as the location was concerned, he had a very infamous place in mind, which would have been the most appropriate one for such a purpose. It was a building of the 1930ies situ-

ated among the woods and outside Minsk back then but now not far from the main avenue of the Belarusian capital. Just after the Second World War the building served as a summer house of the KGB's chief. In 1948 a popular actor from Moscow was secretly killed there by the organs. There were some other mysteries of the same kind connected with this gloomy place. In the 1970ies the building was transformed into a nursery for the children of KGB officials. Later on it had been abandoned and tramps had made their camp there. By the time I met Khanzhankou, the building had been deserted and he had been still waiting for the reply from the Belarusian authorities about his idea of the Repression Museum. He mentioned this fact to me and I immediately decided to shoot him not in his cramped city apartment but nearby this house with such a dark historic atmosphere. He eagerly agreed, especially since he had not been there for quite a while. Still, I needed to see the place for myself first to determine how I would be shooting. A surprise was awaiting me. In the forest I found the answer to Khanzhankou's letter about the Repression Museum. The building and whatever had been surrounding it, was demolished, not a trace of the past left. And then I made a professional mistake. I still could not believe my eyes so I called Khanzhankou to make sure that that was the right spot. He was extremely agitated by the news. Still he promised me to come there next day together for shootings. He did not keep his promise. He, a hardened fighter, was there alone in the very same evening. When we came there together next day, he was reserved and composed, having already been restored from the shock. My hopes for an emotional talk did not come true.

I have to say though that there are no ideal directors as well. You tend to be dissatisfied with your characters almost all the time and sometimes you curse their reactions. Uladzimir Zalatar, a farmer from my film "11 coins" had a subtle nature. It meant he was often ready to weep on numerous occasions. So, on the one hand, I was admiring him for his emotionality but hated his overreaction, at the same time. While editing I had to get rid of many of the tearful moments not to let drama look like comedy.

Still, when a protagonist is reserved and dispassionate, it is also a real challenge for a director. You need to come up with some situation that can help you make him look different.

I did so when I got to know my old amateur filmmaker. He was a nice person, educated, a member of the Journalist Union, wrote some books on the history of his land. Yet, when we started talking he turned out to be absolutely



“wooden”. True, he was also keen on filming things and people and it suggested a solution to me. I just joined him in his wandering along abandoned villages observing him shooting his probably last film. It was a very painful subject for him. Coming from such a village himself, he could not see these places desolated. We started from his native village, which was emotionally the hardest for him. He got very nervous and prohibited me to shoot the ruins of his former house surrounded by a picturesque thicket. None the less, it was so gratifying to see him change with every day of shootings. His interaction with people met on the way and with me was different. Rather dry and formal in the beginning, he was becoming friendly, cordial and more open. That gave me the footage I was looking for.

This process of coming closer to your character can have its peculiarities in every case but basically the scheme is simple: you need time for that. At first, you just have to be in contact to get used to each other. It can last weeks or months sometimes. Even if you have no possibility to meet your character personally, writing letters or making telephone calls will do at that stage as well. Gradually, a common ground will be created. It often involves your own openness too. Theoretically, you should not just ask your characters about themselves holding back the facts about yourself. Mutual candor, no matter how undesirable it can be for you, is much more productive.

When it comes to shootings, things get more complicated. Dealing with characters, you keep asking yourself – where is this border between sincerity and excessive frankness on your side? Normally you need to tell the characters what you expect from them. However, you are not supposed to explain them your whole plan and the general idea of the film. It is harmful in any case. If the protagonists understand your intentions fully and do not approve them, they will do everything to prevent you from doing what you want. If they do not mind and know exactly what you like in their behavior, they will inevitably start acting.

This moment of “naturalness”, “plausibility” of the characters’ behavior is crucial. Modern technologies with no restrictions, imposed earlier by a 35 mm film, help the director a lot. You can shoot for a long time, practically endlessly, and just patiently wait for this wonderful moment, when your protagonist does something spontaneous or tells you something extraordinary, being himself, not reacting to the camera... Still many directors do not stop at this moment of naturalness but go further, to pure acting. The characters are given their parts to

play and they play themselves. They are substituted for their own image, as the director sees them, what the director wants them to be.

This approach deprives the director of the surprises he can experience with his characters. A character is a whole universe, you just need to be able to reveal that. The process of interaction with protagonists is always enigmatic. Gradually you get to know things you had no idea about. It concerns your professional skills as well as your general knowledge. You are often amazed at how different and peculiar people are. For example, Uladzimir Zalatar, my enthusiastic farmer, considered grafting a plant an indispensable part of a man's life. In his judgment, it was a basic trait of masculinity and whoever could not do it with any tree did not deserve the right to be called a man.

Stanislav Shushkevich impressed me in another way. At first, I called him and came to his apartment for a short time to get his consent for shootings. Then we arranged our first meeting with a camera in his summer cottage in 50 km from Minsk. He had gone there by car together with his wife a little before our arrival. To find the place we needed to turn from the highway and drive 5 km more on a country road. Shushkevich told us on the phone we would get lost without him and, in spite of our protests, he said he would go out from their car, let his wife go and meet us at the turning. Someone had told me already that Shushkevich was a modest person with no arrogance and snobbery at all. Now I had an occasion to make sure of that myself. When we were approaching the turning, from afar I saw a figure of an old man, who was rushing to every passing car since he did not know which car was ours. He, a person of high standing, a prominent politician, once the leader of the state, had been still involved in politics and public activity. He had been giving lectures all over the world, which gathered thousands of people paying much money to hear him talk. He had always been in the centre of public attention. While we were shooting him, we could observe him giving a couple of phone interviews every day and personal interviews every other day. Still, this man was standing in the wind on the highway to help yet an unknown shooting crew. Actually, it was me, not him, who needed this film...

I guess my every character influences me somehow.

When I met a little artist Victor Zalacilin for the first time, I liked his pleasant face and his natural manner and decided to make something rather experimental in form. He was an artist, painting meant a lot for him and I decided to use it somehow. Victor's appearance reminded me of the famous picture of

Velasquez, a portrait of a dwarf. Victor had a similar look of his big clever eyes. Yet, as soon as we started filming, I felt how quickly our friendship was developing and the formal film started fading away.

Once I was shooting him by one of his pictures and he was supposed to describe the process of painting and this deep inner transformation that happened to him every time he took up a brush. At first, our talk was very unsatisfactory. Victor was tense and spoke forcedly. I could not understand why. I felt something was wrong. Then he told me. I, having carried out numerous interviews with different characters before, could not realize a very simple thing. Victor was sitting on the floor whereas I was standing. This dominating position was disturbing him. We were not equals. When I sat on the floor as well and we turned out to be of the same height, everything changed magically. Victor suddenly started speaking emotionally and openly about his loneliness and his dog as his only companion in this world. He shared with me what happened to him when his previous dog died. I was so moved that I stopped asking questions and was sitting in silence, crying myself but not taking my eyes off Victor's face since I would ruin the scene otherwise.

After this episode I sensed I was going to have a film with a very traditional form. Victor's incredible monologue was surpassing all formal schemes. I included it in the film almost as it was, with minimal editing. I often remember this shooting and this peculiar feeling of human closeness, when you feel how all barriers between you and another person, and even not your relative, fall. Victor was also surprised by himself. He told me he had not spoken about such intimate things with anyone.

Such unique moments are bound to stay in the director's memory. Sometimes at worse periods they make your professional life more bearable and reconcile with failures a bit.

It happens the characters broaden your human experience in the spheres, where everyone would prefer rather to stay ignorant. The protagonist of my film *The Night is short* was Henadz Myraujou, a remarkable oncologist. Oncomorphology had been his professional occupation and real passion for fifty years. When I saw a cancer cell through his microscope for the first time, I was surprised how beautiful it looked. Microscope was Muraujou's main operating tool. He considered cancer his personal enemy, mighty, but not invincible. Muraujou was a legendary figure. Just looking at the cells he could identify a case. It was often a diagnosis no other doctor would at first agree with but, as a rule, Murau-

you proved it to be right afterwards. He was not just a very skilful doctor, he apparently was born for this profession. He used to say to people, "I wish you would never get to know me", since he was such a qualified specialist that he had to deal with the most difficult and hopeless cases.

I wondered how he could stay in such a pessimistic field so long and not to get totally depressed. He loved nature very much, spent all his free time somewhere in the open air and was a hunter. So I went with him and had to spend a half of a cold night under stars on a high wooden platform in the field, absolutely motionless and noiseless for several hours, so as not to warn wild boars. I was proud that I proved I could cope and deserved respect from Muraujou, whereas my cameraman was criticized for his quiet sighs and impatient rustlings of his coat. The boars did not show up this night, because of the cameraman, I guess.

Muraujou was the first who died and with him I got to know what it means to lose a character. It turned out to be extremely painful. At the funeral service I had a strange feeling of a connection between us. I knew some things about him that even his friends and colleagues who had worked with him many years, didn't. After I left, I did a stupid thing – I dialed his number. Seeing him dead did not help realize he was not here anymore. The phone said he was "not available". That night I saw Muraujou in a dream. I was sitting near his opened coffin, where he was lying. Suddenly he opened his eyes and looked at me. I was not scared of his long stare. On the contrary, it was communication and I was glad to have it.

Later on this distressing experience repeated itself not once. I have lost many characters, the first one, Leanid (Lyonia) Levin as well. His civil funeral was held in a big concert hall in the centre of Minsk. I was walking there with a bunch of flowers wrapped in a newspaper. At the intersection across the concert hall I stopped on the red light. The dismal mood had already taken hold of me so at first I did not notice a huge posh car that pulled up just in front of me waiting for the green light as well. The window went down and a passenger, a dandyish man in his fifties, playfully addressed me, "Hello, beauty, who are your flowers for?" He definitely wanted a short naughty dialogue... I could not help smiling anticipating how I would surprise him and answered readily, "I'm going to the funeral!" enjoying his immediate shock. He lost his flirtatious tone at once and crossed himself devoutly. Then said very seriously, "My condolences! Is it someone close to you?" "Yes, I nodded. My protagonist." The car was off on the green

light and I remembered the passenger's widely opened mouth and his confused questioning eyes... He definitely did not get what I meant, in what relations to the deceased I was...

The parting ceremony, mournful and full of tears, had a surprise for me as well. At the end of it all people went outside on the spacious porch waiting for the carrying-out. I was among others. The funeral was organized by the authorities on the state level. So everything was very solemnly and in a big way. Soldiers in full dress uniform with white gloves appeared. A crowd of people lined up with dozens of wreathes. The orchestra started playing. A photo of Levin was carried out. I looked at it and felt a lump rise in my throat. He was in the same shirt I was shooting him and looked so young... At this moment I saw two old people, a man and woman, beside me and heard the man exclaim in admiration, "If only Lyonia could have seen it! He'd have been so happy!" I smiled through tears and thought that Levin himself with his fine sense of humor sent me these two moments to cheer me up...

Sometimes I imagine all my characters gather all together in one place. It is a little hall already. The thought I have them all is rewarding. Somehow a part of their spirit is in me. I bear it now and will keep it forever.

