THE ROLE OF ETHICS AS A COMPONENT OF PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY-THEMED DOCUMENTARIES

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ABSTRACT
This article examines ethics and philosophical considerations in media and communication within the context of historical documentary filmmaking. The main aim is to speak to the reason for which history-themed documentaries as a form of film that deals with factual representation of history, is not without the application of ethics as a component of philosophy. History is a fascinating subject for any creative endeavor. This article projects the interconnection between historical accuracy and ethical consideration in every historic researcher's quest to achieve objectivity and to represent reality. Moreover, as much as historic researchers are aware that ethical adherence to background evidential values of materials goes a long way to determine the credibility attached to such documentaries (when considered for practical use in an educational, academic, and social setting), there is need to correlate the roles of ethics to the methodology, communication, subjectivity, and interpretation of any historic research endeavor. The study considers ethics vis-à-vis the new historicism theory, the value theory, Aristotle's golden mean to show how cardinal ethics is to the making of historic-themed documentaries.

Introduction

To carry out any research one must bother with communication, especially in social sciences. Media and communication are beyond doubt crucial aspects of social science research. On one part, Clifford Woody (2014) describes research as "defining and redefining problems, formulating hypothesis or suggested solutions; collecting, organizing and evaluating data; making deductions and reaching conclusions; and at last carefully testing the conclusions to determine whether they fit the formulating hypothesis" (p. 12). In other words, it is a process of investigation that requires a systematic approach to the search for what is not known (Scott, 2006). Sometimes research could be a contribution to something that has already been known. For example, a researcher or a documentary filmmaker may have observed a particular trait peculiar to a group of people or cultural heritage. That is a discovery. Another researcher or documentary filmmaker may yet (years later) observe that beyond that trait, a ritual is religiously performed as well as part of a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation. This would be the further insight on that discovery. Kothari (2013) puts it as an original addition of information or findings to an existing collection of knowledge that leads to the pursuit of what is true.

On the other part, communication according to Logan (2010) entails sharing of information, thoughts, beliefs, understanding, etc. between two or more persons. The information or message being passed across usually conveys a meaning that is preempted to be understandable by the receiver once they receive the message. In other words, the essence of any kind of communication is to achieve a certain effect. Etymologically, the word 'communication' in Latin translate as 'communicare', simply meaning 'to make something through sharing'(Weekly, 1967)—emphasis are mine.

…And what of philosophy?

According to Logan (2010) philosophy, which translates to '*philosophia*' in Greek (literally meaning love of wisdom), was simply a description of the process of trying to makes sense of the world. Durant (1961) said philosophy can be the "hypothetical interpretation of the unknown (as in metaphysics)". This simply means there are a lot of unpacked question in any given philosophical approach. Thus, philosophy simply tries to provide the foundation of every aspect and theory or statement in the research. In this case, that will be the research undertaken for a historical documentary film. In the light of this, to subject communication to philosophical inquiry is to try to query an understanding that an act of communication has made an effect through sharing.

In 1948 Harold Lasswell developed one of the earliest and most influential communication models. According to Laswell for one to be able to understand the act of communication one must define:

- Who said it - The sender of the message
- What was said - The message
- In what channel it was said - The medium or media used
- To whom it was said - The recipient of the message
- What effect it has - The message as decoded / understood

It can be deduced that, for communication to occur the message must be received by the recipient. Also, there must be a communication process or framework (mimicking Lasswell's definition) involving a message, a medium, a messenger, and a recipient by which ideas and themes can be shared and understood. This framework and process are the major concepts of communication (Wenxiu, 2015). Again, communication has to go through a medium or media; and, the form of media used will determine the media language—including the different ways a media text can be used to create meaning. In historical documentary films, this will be the filmmaking techniques applied and the vehicles (films, videos, books and platforms) adopted for conveying content/materials presented in the documentary. For this reason, this essay cross-examines ethics and philosophical considerations in media and communication within the context of historical documentary filmmaking and speaks to the reason why history-themed documentary filmmakers as a form of film that deals with the factual representation of history, must take into account the application and relevance of ethics as a component of philosophy in historical documentary filmmaking.

This article explores the philosophical considerations in creating a historical documentary film with regards to the application of Ethics (not minding the other four aspects of philosophy being Logic, Politics, Esthetics and Metaphysics). It examines some of the reoccurring ethical philosophical questions in documentary, reenactment, history, and philosophical methodologies in the social sciences. Furthermore, this article proffers somewhat of a solution to the ethical issues that may arise and philosophical traditions that will inform historical documentary filmmaking practice on the voyage of truth and reality.

In other words, the paper addresses whether there could be any bias or personal attachment in what is going to be mediated in the historical documentary film output. Simply put, can a historical documentary be "objective" or is it not without being "subjective"? Ethics in this context should be carefully considered when making such decisions in not just only the content, but in the handling of any historical point of view whatsoever presented in documentary filmmaking. In what will follow, the article expounds on the five concerns of philosophy, and in the subsequent section tries to answer this question… and I deliberately use the word, '*try*' because philosophical questions never end and may never truly have answers.

Research Philosophy in Media and Communication

Research in media and communication be observed through five (5) concerns of philosophy, namely: Logic, Politics, Ethics, Esthetics, and Metaphysics (Durant, 1961).

i. **Logic:** This is the field of study that tries to understand several forms of human activities. Logic asks questions on 'arguments' using premises (what is known), inferences (what is implied), and conclusions (what must be given the known and the implied). It forms the bane of any research investigation (whether for documentaries, for legal jurisprudence, for scientific queries, or even for day-to-day application of the chain of causation). The end result of logic is the conclusions that can be drawn from the investigation.

   In relation to the context of historical documentary filmmaking (whose objective is to present and in some cases reenact the past), the query of logic goes a long way in validating sources, materials, and content vehicles of history materials; correlating differing accounts, lore and testimonies of past events; sifting through usages, practices and time scopes of events to filter out adulterations, myths, and legends; and paramount of all, validating inferences, conclusions, and perceptions shared as documented history. One of the credible applications of logic is information gathering from eyewitnesses. They have the information to document and the researcher can use tailored (or control) questions in the query. Gill et al., (2008) put it as the preferred way to follow up with new questions that may come up after questions have been administered is interviews. This rationale for certain decisions and activities (not restricted to probing, resolving, and identifying version gaps or testament conflicts regarding the event) will be what logic tries to achieve.

ii. **Politics:** The concerns of this aspect of philosophy relate to creating context. It contemplates on a broader level, the socio-cultural, tribal, geographical, and political impact of the circumstances surrounding a query. The nature of the social organization associated with the history being documented will be questioned by the political philosophical study—along with any appreciation of changes in political structures and settings that could affect or color the objectivity of the consumer of the output of the documentary endeavor when published.

iii. **Ethics:** This aspect of philosophy deals with the propriety of practice. For historical documentaries research, it addresses the psyche and nature of the conduct of the researcher, the witnesses, the medium, the content and materials being presented (whether textual or otherwise), and the consumer; while trying to curb influences of bias in historical narrations. Leaning on Aristotle's teachings and theory of ethics, is clear that ethics waters down to an individual's character and conduct. If an individual focuses on being a good person, they will automatically find themselves interacting with the content and materials of the documentary film ethically (Kraut, 2018). In the context of historical research and documentary filmmaking process, the queries of ethics provide a foundation or guide for the researcher and filmmaker on how to clarify assumptions of the historical event, how to elaborate on beliefs, how to segregate personal prejudices, and how to mediate what the reality and truth of the event. Ekwuazi (1987) points out that "the ultimate function of any film and the auteur's need to accommodate the exigencies of politics determine what aspect(s) of truth/reality to be mediated, and how" (33).

iv. **Esthetics:** This aspect of philosophy deals with presentation. Journalists can confirm that putting a person's picture in an accolade right beside a horrific newsreel of interest to readers can downplay the accolade at best (as buried news) or cast aspersions on the character of the awardee (as innuendoes)—even where both news are presented objectively. While Ethics focus on credibility in handling historical events, the concern of esthetics is to determine the ideal form for the presentation that projects and does not cloud the purpose of communicating a piece of history. Esthetics is mostly related to the art; including the preference and suitability for use of documentary film as a vehicle for reenactment or presentation of history.

v. Heidegger's concept of "film-as-philosophy" expounds how a film has the capacity to portray its depictions as a "factual [presentation,] consistent" with what is known out there. He furthers that a film can "convey a meaning that reflects [need I add or distorts] the nature of things" (Loht, 2015). In truth, the power of presentation that film affords is unmatched (especially in this technology age that has adept affinity for learning through audio-visual cues). That is to say, film as an esthetic is a good fit for presentation of African history in a way that is ontological.

vi. Metaphysics: On surface value metaphysics as a study of philosophy deals with the intangible: namely existence, consciousness, and identity, all within a space-time context. Metaphysics explores the exposures of religion, traditions, customs, communal values, culture, technology (primitive or otherwise), geographical setting, time scope influences, conflicts, and even social matrices for good and evil in defining the existence, consciousness, and identities of the players in any piece of history. In the eyes of metaphysics, the makeup of an individual is always a construct of, and can always be justified by, the individual's exposures.

To historical documentary film making, the query of metaphysics is instrumental to answering what the level of consciousness was (environmental, cultural, technological, theological, etc.) both for the indigenes and foreigners; what the cultural identity was at the time of occurrence of the event; what sort of culture shocks or clashes, transfers of knowledge, transfers of technology (if any) or changes in socio-cultural perspectives surround an occurrence; what was lost during the mélange; what the residual identity translated to for the region under focus; and how this residual identity is treated (whether by the participants of the event within the time-scope under review or by the consumer of that history today).

The metaphysical study of philosophy also comes in handy in aiding an in-depth understanding of the chronological interaction of cultures, the culture shock (and conflict), the resolutions of conflicts, the birth of new residual or resultant identities, the legacy left on value systems then and there. These can be key determinants for consideration of the genres of film and even the nature and extent of the justification for such a choice.

Philosophical Ethics and Documentary

Of the three kinds of films (documentary, feature, and experimental films), the documentary film is ideal for captivating a target audience on a large scale with valuable information (Bruzzi, 2006; Ekwuazi, 1996; Gaines & Renov, 1999; Watson, 2021). It is potent for drawing the audience's attention to truths (as it were) about events and speaking to their values, concerns, and interests (Johnson, 2022). One of the key documentary theorists Bill Nichols points out that a documentary adds "a new facade" to the general knowledge about a chosen topic (Nichols, 2001), at which point, the information shared settles in as part of the collective general known knowledge. Perhaps that is what film scholar, Hyginus Ekwuazi (personal conversation, January 2022) meant by "once a documentary has achieved its aim, it becomes useless."

Taking into consideration philosophy and film as phenomenological ontology, the ethical philosophical consideration or question that comes to mind is: How do documentary filmmakers present historical content and make sure its depictions (especially in the documentary) are factually consistent with the possible historical event? Loht (2015) in his article 'The Relevance of Heidegger's Conception of Philosophy to the Film-As-Philosophy Debate' expounded how the movie *The Godfather* (1972) arguably represents reality, which (as he puts it) is "a genuine moment in American cultural history" (p. 5).

Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker (1980)'s argument as translated by Schmidt (2013) is that "whenever we speak seriously of reality, we speak of reality, if nobody speaks of reality, reality is not talked about" (p. 100). Meaning that, if a historical documentary film does not feature someone (a witness) or something (textual or otherwise) from the event that speaks about the event, then reality is not a part of the history is being depicted. Furthermore, Seel's (1998) "philosophical realism" as translated by

Schmidt (2013) provides additional support to these arguments. He says "Only because there are objects which exist independently of our knowledge, media can have a recognizing access to objects" (100) In other words, reality is hinged on the evidential value of accounts and events.

It is in dealing with the evidential value of reality (or truths, as I dare plainly call them) that ethics come to play. Interestingly, when adjudging whether these truths of reality are properly handled, there are only two (2) extremes of concern that speak to the character of any historical documentary research—"credible" or "not credible"! And of whatever persuasion the researcher may be, the judgment passed on the historic documentary smears on him or her.

Ethical Philosophical Basis of New Historicism

New historicism is one of the theories this research considers in arriving at the import of the ethical philosophy of truth in historical documentary filmmaking. As a background, the new historicism theory was coined by American critic, Stephen Greenblatt in 1980 in his book, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From Moore to Shakespeare. New historicism theory argues that there is no universal meaning or truth in history, and the meaning imputed to history reflects power relations at the time of writing as well the time the event took place (Hoover, 1992). On face value, this theory seems to settle the question of historic objectivity in documentary filmmaking as an outright impossibility.

While this article's erudition may fail to challenge this position, it must be noted that even at the time of occurrence of an event, outright historic objectivity cannot be achieved. Man, by nature is not a machine, but rather a subjective being of communication. Any two persons witnessing an event cannot relate to the event objectively as is being witnessed simultaneously by both. How much more can a researcher poking through the remains of an event, which was not personally witnessed, after the fact?

To compound the issue, the nature of communication is such that expression does not mean impression! Something is always lost in a communication loop—whether due to the choice of medium, circumstances of presentation, the disposition of the messenger when presenting the information, the disposition of the listener when receiving the message, language barrier, timing of presentation, communication noise and distractions, biases, choice of words… pick your poison! The expression of the message by the messenger will never be exact with the impression received; so saying that communication itself flaws outright historic objectivity. The good news is that in propounding the theory of new historicism, Stephen Greenblatt sets an alternative standard. He further observes that in the place of that impossible universal truth in history (or that outright historic objectivity) one must look to the power play of relations between two epochs: the time of occurrence and the time of documenting an event. This simply means that, instead of achieving exactness, there ought to (at least) be congruence between the message left by the trail of history, and the message communicated by the historic researcher such that all may see substantial objectivity, and not perfection. This all the more buttresses the role of ethics in historic documentary filmmaking.

As the name implies, before the new historicism theory, there was the old historicism theory. Old historicism can be traced back to the decade of 1970s. In arriving at what the substantial object reality of the past (history) is, old historicism places emphasis on the evidential value of literary texts, with specific focus analysing the literary texts alone. As long as this old theory is concerned, only that which is textual is relevant; and where a piece of history is not documented (as it is with oral traditions and folklore) or where a piece of evidence is not textual (like surviving witness accounts), such a narrative or evidence is given lesser consideration. So, in terms of analysing the past, old historicism looks at the text that has been documented; while on the other hand, new historicism remakes the past based on the literary past (Pieters, 2001). In truth, the search for substantial objectivity with this theory is narrower, and limiting can lead to an honest miscarriage of historical reality, especially where the researcher does maintain objectivity on oblivious to any faults or defects with the documented text, itself. Think of it as the case of a person who is brainwashed into honestly telling a lie, which the person genuinely believes to be true! Ethically, while the person may genuinely protest credibility, the mere reliance on non-credible text impeaches the research endeavor thus cutting short all efforts to reach substantial objectivity.

The propensity for such a miscarriage of truth is less with new historicism. To achieve substantial objectivity, new historicism theory proposes a compromise, which expands the scope of the researcher from always only focusing on the literary text of the story (as is the case with old historicism theory) to further looking for corroboration of the literary texts with non-literary evidence including witness accounts solicited from interviews. Although the literary text is significant, new historicism argues that other kinds of documents should be consulted while analyzing any literary text—the balance which is held up by the ethical integrity of the researcher. The two (2) weights on the scales of historic evidence acts as pressures that sort of counter balance on ethical consideration and serve as checkers that help the researcher remain properly guided while recreating the past. Veeser (2013) puts it as "those reciprocal historical pressures by which the past has shaped the present and the present reshapes the past" (24).

Media Ethics

There are several methods of communicating history and newer forms are constantly evolving. This means the question of communicating history ethically is even more pivotal than it was before. The moral rule of conduct that guides how we make decisions is ethics. Barnes & Griffin (1997) describes philosophical ethics simply as an attempt to offer a rational response to the question of how humans should best live. The arm of ethics that relates to history-themed documentaries will be media ethics. Media include print media (newspapers, magazines, and books), recordings, motion pictures, and electronic media (radio, television, and the computer). According to Drozdek (2015), the overall rules of conduct that guide the decisions we make in terms of encoding, sending, receiving, and decoding information through the means of media is media ethic.

For example, in terms of presenting history, a documentary filmmaker should take into consideration issues such as bias, privacy, public interest, stereotyping, and many more. If the aspect of history that is being portrayed is done ethically there will be trust and understanding among the filmmaker and the audience. An understanding of media ethics is what separates a media professional from an amateur because being a documentary filmmaker involves talking to people, writing about people, and encouraging people to tell you (the media) their stories.

And how is ethics perceived? Aristotle describes ethics as the examination of the good of an individual. Aristotle (1895) argues that the man who possesses character excellence does the right thing at the right time and in the right way. In other words, virtue is practical, and a man of virtue should practice what he or she preaches. The practicing process will be enjoyable if they are virtuous.

Virtue theory is an ethical theory that emphasizes an individual's character rather than following a set of rules. Aristotle believes that if humans can focus on being good people, naturally the right action will follow effortlessly (Kraut, 2018). Aristotle ties in excellence and virtue such that excellent activities will always be regarded as pleasurable for the man of virtue. This could also mean that the right course of action depends on the details of a particular situation a man finds himself in, rather than the course of action being a generated set of actions by law that should be applied.

The virtue theory reflects the ancient assumption that 'humans have a fixed nature... in essence—and the way we flourish is by adhering to that nature (Tallman, 2019). Aristotle describes it as "proper functioning". For example, from the common understanding of cars, the core function of that car is to drive you from point A through to point B. If, for any reasons having to do with the failure of that car's engine or construction, you don't get to your destination, then the car is bad. This applies to a historical documentary that cannot fulfil its core function, it is bad; and in Aristotle's view, unethical. If a documentary filmmaker or photographer is tasked with a documentary and (re)presentation of history, the ability of that individual to deliver on the documentary while maintaining substantial objectivity with the reality past of the truths in history makes them a good documentary filmmaker or photographer. However, how the individual subjectively interacts or meddles with the decisions made in regards to the credibility of the content and materials, people's private information, or the manner in which the event is presented as biased pegs such an individual as far from virtuous.

When one thinks about the doctrines of the theory of virtue, the question that comes to mind is what action is referred to as virtue and what is not. How do we know what action to take or how do we measure the decisions we make to determine which is right and which is wrong? There are no specific terms for what is right and what is wrong. Aristotle uses the golden mean to explain this. The golden mean as he describes it is the midpoint between two vices: Deficiency and Excess. The balance between these two vices when placed on a beam is the golden mean. For example, if courage is ethically measured using this concept, cowardice will be regarded as a deficiency on the scale while recklessness will be placed at the other extreme as an excess. It follows that for the researcher of historic documentaries, honesty will be the mid-point between brutal honesty and failing to say the things that need to be said.

Although virtue lies in between pairs of opposing vices, the theory of virtue, arguably, has room for flexibility. A mean between deficiency and excess can be described as something that is just enough. Koehn (2012) assessed the doctrine of the mean in Aristotle's moral philosophy of ethics and one of the conclusions drawn from the sufficiency view is that the mean is sometimes broad and not necessarily a point. This claim is relational. Referring back to the earlier description of courage, the golden mean for virtuous behavior here is not just the definite activity of (re)presenting historical materials credibly. It's a range of activities spanning from those tending towards heroism to those tending towards self-preservation.

To demonstrate the sufficiency view on ethics, Koehn (2012) made an illustration with "Hitting a Mark: The Good Archer." If is it said the goal is to strike the middle point of a target, should we not take into consideration the condition, abilities and dispositions involved in shooting arrows? Every archer will be judged as good or bad according to their strength. It is important to point out that while the sufficiency view does not negate the doctrine of the golden mean, it argues further that the plausibleness of the golden mean suggested by Aristotle should not remain a static mid-point, but fluid enough to accommodate mitigating circumstances that could justify an otherwise non-midpoint behavior as equally ethical. Ethics should neither exist in a vacuum nor in isolation to the circumstances qualifying the practice.

The ethical problems that historical documentary filmmaking faces increase as the docuteurs evolve. The decision as to how to interact with historical content seems to remain in the hands of the documentary filmmakers. In the same way man is tasked with the responsibility of making moral and ethical decisions on habits, work, settling issues, and other daily activities, the historical documentary filmmaker will have to spool from all the rules of media and professional etiquette available to be able to ethically interact with written or (re)presented history, its sources, evidence, and past truths. This essay affirms that while the responsibility behooving on documentary filmmakers to tell the truth may be daunting, they are still the ones to decide what and how to tell it—in which case making them both judge and jury!

Conclusion

Digital technology in the 21st century has compelled media professionals and scholars to engage in more complex research and content. The audience are voracious and continuously searches for novelty through research—each time with a higher expectation. Hence, this research wove through the philosophical approach, the five philosophical studies, the new historicism theory, and Aristotle's golden mean to demonstrate the role of ethics in documenting and representing versions of the reality of history.

This article maintains that ethics, as a cardinal element of philosophy, certainly guides the process of how media and communication research can transmit (or, in the event of a lack of it, distort) historical messages that convey meaning.

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