

in deep waters
An Experimental Documentary Film about the Covid-19 Pandemic

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December 2021
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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank everyone for their support throughout this filmmaking process that began in March of 2020 with a simple idea to capture the unprecedented times that we were all going to live through. My old friend and mentor was there to bounce ideas back and forth with me regarding this project. 2020 took him away too soon; this film is a tribute to his eternal friendship and mentorship over the past four years. I would like to thank my partner, Alexandra Duke, for her patience throughout this process and for her significant input in writing the film's outro, gifting the project with the best closure it could get.

I would like to thank my project advisor Elliot Montague for working with me over the past year, for his critiques and guidance throughout the production and post-production process. I would like to thank Hannah Goodwin for being my theoretical component advisor and for her willingness to screen the film in class in its fine cut stage. I would like to thank Anthony Lee for being on the thesis committee, and for my former advisor Robin Blaetz for the encouragement to just move forward with the project.

I thank all twelve interviewees (Yiwen Bao '21, Jamie Capps FP '21, Whitney Troy FP '22, Nebraska Chatham '22, Bethany Powell FP '22, Joan Grenier – Odyssey Bookstore, Sarah Bingham Ada Comstock '22, Gabrielle Rodriguez '22, Mei Fujimori '22, Julia Bloomberg '21, AJ Johnson '23, Carolyn Dietel, Director of the Frances Perkins Program and Transfer Admission) for their participation and for their willingness to be vulnerable and open in front of the camera during such difficult times.

I would also like to thank my friends, family, the Frances Perkins Program and Community, GoFundMe donors, Media Services at Library, Information and Technology Services at Mount Holyoke College.

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Introduction

1. Background: How did this idea come to life? / Pre-Production Process

The common opinion at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic was that *We were all in this together, that we were all on the same boat during this storm*. I wanted to challenge this common belief because we were not all on the same boat. We were all in the same storm, but we were all riding on different vehicles, with some being on yachts while others were barely floating on logs.

The idea came to mind in March 2020 when the lockdown began, and I brought it up in a conversation with my friend and mentor R. Wayne Gray. He knew that I wanted to be a filmmaker and encouraged my idea to try to make a documentary film about what was going on. He was there to bounce ideas back and forth with, and even though I never got to talk to him about the actual hands-on process, those initial conversations gave me enough drive to just believe in it. I felt the need to capture what was happening. It was a unique moment in history and an opportunity to challenge the theoretical concept of *cinema verité*. Known for its observational cinematic quality, *cinema verité* filmmakers considered their camera as a tool to capture and portray the truth. Jeanne Hall describes how “*Cinema verité* filmmakers claimed to be as unobtrusive as possible, to become like flies on the wall. [...] Received wisdom has it not that *cinema verité* filmmakers actually achieved such invisibility, but that all evidence of their inevitable obtrusiveness wound up on the cutting room floor.” It was a matter of realizing that the finished product could have achieved the illusion of objectiveness, but that the traces left behind during the filmmaking and post-production process were indeed saying otherwise.¹ Given that the audience only sees the

¹ Hall, Jeane. “Realism as a Style in *Cinema Verité*: A Critical Analysis of Primary”. In *Cinema Journal* 30, No. 4 (Summer 1999): 24-50

finished product, the editing methods used by cinema verité filmmakers are unknown to the public. Filmmakers can make it seem like their projects were unobtrusive, especially when using different shots glued together to portray continuity, to give context, and to depict their intended message to the public.

I believed that documentary filmmaking could be objective prior to taking film courses at Mount Holyoke College. Taking Introduction to Film with Robin Blaetz during my first semester at Mount Holyoke College, in the fall of 2019, challenged a lot of my beliefs in filmmaking. My understanding shifted as I evolved from a spectator into an aspiring filmmaker, beginning to understand the amount of thought and work that filmmaking requires behind the scenes. During the spring semester of 2020, a 300-level course in “Women Experimental Filmmakers” and a 200-level course in “Global Film/Media After 1960” opened my eyes and helped me to see independent and low budget films that break the Western filmmaking rules. Realizing that there is no objective view in filmmaking and documentary filmmaking, I decided to embrace a subjective point of view with this project and approach an experimental documentary style.

In filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky’s own words, “a book read by a thousand people is a thousand different books.” Thinking about this quote gave me the push to believe in this project and its progression, understanding its subjective matter and its relation to my experience throughout the process. This film was created from my point of view, highlighting on the twelve interviewees’ points of view and their spoken experiences, during a time when I was isolated on campus with little to no human contact. This project offered me and my interviewees an opportunity to connect in-person and get away from the Zoom interactions that felt so isolating and impersonal. If this project was done by

somebody else, their unique perspectives and experiences would look very different than what I put together over the past year and a half.

During the spring semester of 2021, I took a course called “Film Theory: Cinema/City”, which presented a wide variety of theoretical ideas since the beginnings of film theory. Siegfried Kracauer, writing in the 1920s, argued that we needed to pay more attention to film, as it was not there just for the entertainment of it². This theoretical concept made me look at the project and realize that what I have been collecting was needed, that contemporary cinema needs more films that are rooted in our need to connect with the world that we live in. The film industry needs projects that capture more than just entertainment. Connected to this, I wanted to challenge Baudelaire’s theory of the flâneur, a male character that became popular in European literature during the nineteenth century by wandering around the city aimlessly gazing³. The flâneur became the standard observer of the modern urban life, someone that would spend their entire day walking around the busy city streets. With so much going on every day, the flâneur developed a vast knowledge, becoming very familiar with people’s routines, rush hours, accidents, and the urban organized chaos. Women had no place on the streets, being constricted to the domestic lifestyle, and therefore, a woman that was wandering on the streets was considered a prostitute. Instead, I wanted to show that women can be wandering around too, paying attention to their environment, registering what is happening around them, followed by them being able to go home and create art from it.

² Corrigan, Timothy, Patricia White, Meta Mazaj. *Critical Visions in Film Theory*, edited by Timothy Corrigan, 289-308. Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010.

³ Wolff, Janet. “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity.” In *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, edited by Andrew Benjamin, 141–56. *Warwick Studies in Philos. & Lit.* London: Routledge, 1989.

Our living environments are the best inspiration for artmaking, and so much can be created by simply being present and observing. As we all have to face this modern trauma caused by the pandemic, mobility is not something that can be taken for granted anymore. It became harder to just walk around on the streets, to observe people living their lives, and to be able to create a connection with potential subjects for art projects. People were faced with the need to isolate in order to be safe. This changed the way we interact with one another, as our main interactions transitioned to a virtual world instead of the real world. It is so much harder to observe and connect with others when all we see about them is perfectly curated into a small digital window. With all the constraints, difficulties, the trauma and anxiety around interacting with others, this project became important not just for me but for my interviewees as well. Being able to have a face-to-face conversation about traumas and anxieties caused by the pandemic and being given a platform to be heard was special, needed, and very healing.

The percentage of women in the film industry is far lower than the percentage of men. According to an article on the New York Film Academy's blog, there is a 5 to 1 ratio of men working on films to women.⁴ This was an important factor in my project, and it empowered me to power through and fulfill the project during moments when I would get overwhelmed, and when I was unable to see it finalized.

⁴ Gender Inequality in Film, New York Film Academy blog, <https://www.nyfa.edu/film-school-blog/gender-inequality-in-film/>

2. Initial Process / Production Process

I gathered the initial ideas and managed to purchase a DSLR camera in April 2020 that was capable of recording video. I started asking people if they wanted to be part of this project, but it did not become a real thing until I moved to campus in August 2020.

The first interview was conducted on November 16th, 2020, and that is the moment that this project began growing roots, shifting from a conceptual idea into something tangible. People started gaining interest in the project and interviews started coming up one after the other.

On November 20, 2020, I began journaling the filmmaking process, writing down each candidate, details about each of them, possible interview dates, theory concepts that inspired the film, and I started cataloguing all the footage collected after each interview.

I started collecting b-roll footage from all around campus over the course of a year to integrate into the film and break the viewers' attention from just watching a person speak, to different shots from nature or studios. This was meant to highlight how the pandemic itself felt, not knowing what was going to happen next. My intention was to create a parallel between the inside locations and nature outside, highlighting the two very different environments that became such crucial parts of our daily lives during the lockdowns.

a. Materials Used: Equipment Selection and Use

Initially, I started using equipment on loan from Media Services as I was working there during the one year that I spent living on campus. All the interviews were recorded on my Nikon D750, but I needed sound recording equipment for all my interviews. For the first few of them, I used sound recording equipment from work.

In February 2021, I set up a GoFundMe and requested \$1,000 for new sound recording equipment that would offer a higher quality sound. Thanks to everyone that helped, in just five days I reached my goal. I was able to purchase a shotgun microphone, an audio recorder, and a lavalier microphone to increase the quality of the sound for this project.

Learning to work with new equipment on the go had its own challenges. I had to learn everything from zero. My “Introduction to Video Production” course in the fall of 2020, and my “Advanced Projects in Video Production” course in the spring of 2021 offered me the foundations of filmmaking that I was lacking. They helped me gain better knowledge in how to use sound equipment, how to use a DSLR camera to record video at the proper settings, how to make certain decisions regarding using lenses, working with natural lighting, and how to catalogue and edit footage in Premiere Pro.

During this process I have made a lot of mistakes, but with each interview, my skills have gotten better and better. By the last few interviews, I was confident about the image quality, the sound quality, and my editing skills, along with just being comfortable around my interviewees and having confidence in the project itself.

b. Restrictions and Challenges:

As you can see in the finished product, most of my interviewees did not wear a mask while we were filming. We all followed the Covid-19 precautions; those that were comfortable would take their mask off to help record a better-quality sound and offer an enhanced visual to the interviews where the viewer is able to see facial expressions and emotional reactions.

While filming someone that was wearing a mask, I was wondering how to make this specific section of the film believable. Given that you do not see someone’s lips moving,

how do you know that what you hear is what they said? This made me connect the film with Trinh T. Minh-ha documentary style, especially her film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989). The film covers the themes of treason and translation errors regarding women's lives during the Vietnam War⁵. Minh-ha plays with the translations published in journals and newspapers from the western world, mixing them up with images of different actors on screen, text, and voiceovers that were different from the written text. This film makes you question reality, the information seen on the screen, and the emotions felt when hearing the stories that are being told. It just became more evident that when we watch somebody speak to us on the screen in a documentary, we pay attention to so many little details that we are not aware of just to be reassured that what we hear is directly connected to what we see. Masks make this so much more difficult because you cannot see the lips moving. Questioning what we see is vital in a world where we are constantly being stimulated by moving images, virtual meetings, and social media photos and videos. Trinh T. Minh-ha's film is the perfect example of a historically known event where information was altered depending on who was telling the story. The pandemic will also be a historically known event told by millions in million different ways. It is up to us to choose how we see our own experience, and this global phenomenon overall. This film thought me to question the reality shown on the screens, just like I started questioning the reality behind cinema verité films and the objectivity on the screen. It also helped me understand the difficulties filmmakers have to face when portraying stories told by others. It is crucial to treat vulnerable stories with respect and consideration in order to build credibility.

⁵ Duong, Lan. "Traitors and Translators: Reframing Trinh T. Minh-Ha's Surname Viet Given Name Nam." *Discourse (Detroit, MI)* 31, no. 3 (September 22, 2009): 195.

Taking Dziga Vertov's Kino-Eye style in documentary filmmaking, the one that influenced the cinema verité style by just capturing life as it was happening in front of the camera, I started recording things the way they happened. I used natural lighting, locations and rooms that were already available to us, followed rules and restrictions, and did not modify anything in the environment other than juggling around with resources that were already there. Using the Kino-Eye technique, I learned that I did not need the most recent piece of equipment, and I did not need to invest in lighting and stabilizing equipment to capture raw stories. Having a very limited budget, I had to use creativity to overcome the limitations of my own technological hardware, including the limitations of my DSLR camera, the lack of an image stabilizer, having to adapt to the lighting in each room, and sometimes not having a tripod for an interview. Vertov created a new era in documentary filmmaking by grabbing his camera and filming the way days went by in the city. I took my camera and recorded the way days went by during an isolating time on a college campus. Vertov taught me how to see past my limitation, how to use creativity to accomplish my artistic goals, and how to just use the way I saw the world as my unique creative expression.

Finding locations that would accommodate a comfortable interview experience was difficult. Except those interviews filmed inside the Frances Perkins housing on 17 Morgan Street, all the other interviews were filmed in public places. Sudden changes, interruptions, and the public nature of these locations made the interview process something both I and the interviewees had to adapt to on the go. These locations were sanitized and safe. The equipment used, especially the lavalier microphone was cleaned prior and after each interview for safety measures.

Post-Production

1. Overall Process and Footage Selection

The interview selection process was a difficult one, keeping in mind that subjective view and knowing that the film will be centered around what I thought made each person's story interesting. Given that the initial assembly cut was three hours long, a lot of the things that could have been an important part of the film had to be cut out for the final thirty-minute fine cut. Remembering Tarkovsky's quote during the process, the footage that I collected could be used to create so many different versions of this film. I just had to follow what felt right for my version of this project. I worked on the assembly cut and finalized it at the end of the 2021 spring semester. Over summer break, I slowly started cutting down from it. This process was similar to sculpting a large block of marble, shaping it around with each cut. I worked with Elliot Montague throughout this difficult process, getting guidance on what the selected parts felt like, as well as getting an outside perspective on the footage, given that I got so attached and immersed in this whole project. A few of my friends from the Frances Perkins community looked at the longer cut and gave me feedback on how some of the interviews made them feel, which was very useful.

The overall shape of the interviews is not flowing in a conventional sentence-like form and that is where the experimental approach is most visible. The interviews show segments of those conversations that I had with these interviewees, and they represent various themes and topics that are cut up and edited together between two to three minutes per interviewee. The fragmented structure of these interviews works in similar ways to Trinh T. Minh-ha's documentary style, while the unmodified way of capturing reality resembles Vertov's Kino-Eye style. This structure breaks the typical westernized documentary style where

everything is perfectly curated, letting the viewer be a witness of experimentation. The shape of these interviews shows the multitude of these conversation topics, as well as resembling the feeling of the Covid-19 pandemic and its constant uncertainty from day to day, not knowing what was coming next. The interviews are also fast paced, with a three second break between each interviewee, offering a little breathing and thinking space, yet flowing from one to the other, resembling their temporary quality.

2. Backbone, Title, Introduction and Outro

Once the cut was shorter, it became the backbone of the film covering themes, coping mechanisms, people's views on the world and what was happening at each given moment. These moments added all together started the creative process of the film itself, where I needed to select b-roll footage that related to the words being said as well as the feelings that were evoked while listening to the words that were spoken.

The opening footage represents the inspiration for the title of the film *in deep waters* as it connects with the root of the project and the need to challenge the common belief that we are all on the same boat. The title highlights my own belief that we are all in the same storm facing unprecedented and very difficult times. The water drops set the overall mood for the film itself, reflecting on past and what we had all been through.

The story opens with a shot of the famous Mount Holyoke College gates during daylight. This shot is meant to establish the film's location and connection with the community I lived in for a year. The story ends with the same shot of the gates only at nighttime. This creative choice was meant to keep the story within the Mount Holyoke community and its neighboring areas. This creative choice also connects the film with the poetic form, a way of creating experimental films in a ritualistic or cycle type way, first used by the mother of the American avant-garde, Maya Deren⁶. Opposed to the classical Hollywood cinema style which was perfectly curated so that there were never any unanswered questions, Deren used film as a form of expression in unconventional ways by breaking most of those rules. In her films, the notions of spatial and time continuity are challenged, and it forces the viewer to pay attention to what is happening on the screen.

⁶ Kappenberg, Claudia. "Film as Poetry." *International Journal of Screendance* 3 (Fall 2013): 101–19.

The “Women Experimental Filmmakers” course introduced me to her rebellious ways of expression which was right around the time of the first lockdown in the spring of 2020. This course gave me the inspiration to make a film, but Deren was the one that inspired me to approach the project in an experimental way. Known for her use of cycles and the poetic form, I chose to use a similar approach for the establishing shot of the Mount Holyoke College Gates during daytime, ending with a shot of The Gates at night. The visuals bring the viewer within this small world at the beginning and take the viewer out of it at the end, representing the cyclical nature of life experiences that have a beginning and an end. It works as a visual hook, but also as a need to capture these stories within a community, in a specific geographical location, yet normalize the feelings around the pandemic itself by letting the viewer relate to some of these stories as well. Seen from an outside perspective, this technique captures a single day – in the lives of these interviewees, in the lives of the viewers, and in the life of the filmmaker. The cyclical nature of life can be interpreted in various different ways, and that is the beauty of it.

The film’s introduction that I wrote states the following: “We are all bearing the same storm / but we are carrying it differently. / We chug along in different vehicles... / and while some are on a yacht / others are facing the storm on a log. / As I was isolated from everything / on the Mount Holyoke College campus, / this project became the closest thing to / those in-person conversations away from Zoom. / You will hear little segments of how / we are all trying to predict the future / as we sit in this waiting room / hoping for change / hoping for light / craving normalcy.” This section is meant to give context to what will be seen in the film itself. It informs the viewer where the idea came from, the geographical location of the project, the context of isolation, the need for human interaction, and the

fragmented nature of the interviews that they are going to see. It also highlights on our constant need to predict the future, living through so much uncertainty, and how most of the time what we predicted never really happened. This introduction is added into the film through a voiceover, and it is the first voice you hear in the film, which offers context for my subjective view in this film.

The essence of the film captures the twelve interviewees in chronological order of their interview dates as it follows: Yiwen Bao – November 16th, 2020, Jamie Capps – December 30th, 2020, Whitney Troy – December 31st, 2020; Nebraska Chatham – January 10th, 2021, Bethany Powell – January 14th, 2021, Joan Grenier – January 25th, 2021, Sarah Bingham – February 6th, 2021, Gabrielle Rodriguez – February 15th, 2021, Mei Fujimori – March 15th, 2021, Julia Blomberg – April 27th, 2021, AJ Johnson – May 6th, 2021, and Carolyn Dietel – May 25th, 2021. I chose to write the date in year/month/day shape in the film itself because that is how I keep track and store all my footage, and it connects the interviews with the storing and cataloguing process.

The film's final monologue, the outro, was written by Alexandra Duke, and it encapsulates the best closure and ending to this film. I had difficulties remaining detached from the footage and the stories all throughout the process, up until the outro section was written. Because of this, I was able to look at the project as an almost finalized body of work, making it easier to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Being immersed in this project brought a lot of challenges around mental health, replaying these moments and with that, reliving them every day I worked on the film. The outro states the following: "Until we learn how to sit with it. / How to sit with the pain / how to sit with the beauty / the shame / the guilt / the fear / and watch / as you become a careful observer / to all the

moments that make us human / as we realize / we are not that different from each other. / And we will pick up the pieces / as we move forward. / That the moments we have all been chasing / have been right beside us this whole time / and we recalibrate the stories that we told. / What is the story that you will tell yourself? / The story of triumph? / The story of pain? / Of falling and getting back up again? / What story will you carry with you? / Choose carefully. / The narratives we tell ourselves / hold the utmost power.” This comes from an outside perspective of someone that saw the way this project affected me over the last year. These words are meant to offer closure around the project, but it also invites the viewer to reflect upon the memories and the experiences that we have all been through. It teaches us that we have the power to change the way we see this experience. Along with that, it also makes the viewer think whether the stories that we see on television, on social media, and the media in general are what they seem to be. It encapsulates the experimental approach of the film itself in challenging the viewer to see filmmaking, our own memories, and the information we receive daily in a different way, from a more objective view to heal and to move forward in a healthy way. The film ends with b-roll from the creek close to campus which is meant to show a sign from my old friend and mentor, R. Wayne Gray, a week after he passed away. As tribute to him, I added a 5 second section that says: “In Loving Memory of R. Wayne Gray (January 10, 1944 – August 28, 2020).”

Sound Editing

1. Challenges:

Some challenges faced during the sound editing process were rooted in my little experience with sound collecting and sound synchronizing. My main mistake was not synchronizing the visual footage with the lavalier microphone sound from the beginning. Instead, I cut up everything and I used the camera sound up until I needed to put together a rough cut. As the timeline itself was filled with just little chunks of footage, I realized a little too late that I had to individually synchronize each section with the microphone sound. This took a little too long in the editing process and made it a lot more complicated than it should have been. I did learn that I should never start the editing process until all my footage and sound are synchronized. I had to learn how to synchronize and edit sound from tutorials, one of them being the one we used to learn basic editing skills in Introduction to Video Production. Reading articles and trying to find simpler ways to go around my initial mistake helped realize that there were no tricks around it, and it had to be done little by little. That way, I rebuilt the timeline from 0, synchronizing the sound one by one without it becoming overwhelming and confusing.

2. Collaborating with Oleksii Levchenko / St. Chine

Throughout the sound editing process, I collaborated with my friend Oleksii Levchenko. He helped with the audio editing, with useful guiding tools, and he cleaned up and offered a hand in correcting sound levels. He helped unify the interviews, despite the different sound equipment that I had to work with throughout the project. This collaboration saved me time and offered a higher quality finished product. It also made me realize that in the future, I should collaborate more and that it is hard to make a documentary project on your own. I had the opportunity to work with a small crew during the spring semester on a short narrative project for our “Advanced Projects in Video Production” course, and even though it was a tiring experience, the collaborative aspect of the project itself made it be more fun. The film industry is very collaborative, and I would prefer to work with a crew instead of working on my own. Beautiful things come out of collaborations and acknowledging that everyone has a different set of skills is a positive addition to any project.

The soundtrack was composed by him as well prior to the initial rough cut. He created *isolation* based on the emotion we talked about, under his artist’s name St. Chine. The mixing and mastering of the final version were done by vseh blag, a professional that collaborated with Levchenko before.

I find the soundtrack to encapsulate the emotions and the overall feeling of the film itself. I integrated the soundtrack at the beginning of the film, for a minute, during the rain drop b-roll, the main title, the introduction voiceover, and the initial establishing shot. The rest of the soundtrack was added at the end, right after Carolyn Dietel’s interview ends,

during the ending shot of the gates, the b-roll of the ray of light, the outro voiceover, and all throughout the credits.

Conclusion

The overall dynamic in human interactions has changed throughout the process of this film. If I had to do this documentary during the current changes, it probably wouldn't have been the same, due to a shift in people's willingness to connect and interact with others. At the beginning, especially after the first lockdown ended, people were looking for connections and cherished any connections that could be built. As time went by, people had a harder time talking about what happened. The last few interviews happened to be a lot shorter than the first ones, with the interviewees having a difficult time digging into memories and what happened. Being in this situation for a little over a year started to be apparent in the ways people talked. The summer of 2021 disconnected the communities in odd ways, and if I were to conduct interviews in the Fall of 2021 these would have been a lot shorter and drier. I think it would have been difficult to get people excited about the project at a later stage of the pandemic. Being on campus during the academic year of 2020-2021 with only a handful of students allowed to be there, and later about 156 students in the Spring, made it easier to juggle around and accommodate the process. Now, with more than 2000 students, faculty and staff members present on campus and the strict regulations regarding all the safety measures due to new variants, it would have been difficult to find spaces to conduct interviews.

The amount of work that this project required, on top of the usual school workload made it more difficult to find pleasure in the process. My attachment to the project also caused certain difficulties, but after the ending monologue was finalized by Alexandra Duke, it felt like a rock was lifted of my shoulders and I could see it from a less personal and engaged perspective.

The project itself taught me so much, especially the importance of collaborations in the field, yet it proved me that I was able to create art with the community in such difficult moments.

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