WHAT HAPPYNS

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ABSTRACT

My thesis project, titled *What Happyns*, is a video documentary, approximately 45 minutes in length, comprised largely of interviews recorded with attendees at the Stanley Park Lawn Bowling Club and the Plaza Skateboard Park, both located in Vancouver, B.C. This paper identifies three documentary film histories—*the ethnographic, the quotidian* and *the essay*—that have informed my project. A number of definitive filmic works within these histories are discussed in relation to the project, most importantly *Chronique d'un été* and *Le joli mai*. Other important context is provided by the work of Errol Morris and Ross McElwee, as well as by Michael Apted's *Up Series*. The role of the interview in documentary film is examined, as are the key concepts around which *What Happyns* was constructed: our collective conception of happiness, especially its recent manifestation in the field of Positive Psychology, and Laura Rascaroli's notion of the "interstitial space" as it is created by the deployment of voice-over in an essay film. Emphasis is lent throughout to the emergent process often involved in the making of documentary films, and the thesis project is viewed, in conclusion, mainly as an essay film.

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Dedicated to Bob Town

1930 – 2012

A gentleman.

"If we dissect this many-faced crowd, we find that it is the sum of solitudes. For two centuries happiness has been a new idea in Europe; people have not yet got used to it."

From the narration for *Le joli mai,* Chris Marker.

"We wanted to make a film about love but it turned out to be an impersonal kind of film..."

Jean Rouch, from the final scene of *Chronique d'un été,* Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch.

"Are you after light, or are you after heat? Heat is easy to get."

Mike Wallace, in conversation with Charlie Rose, discussing the art of the interview.

INTRODUCTION

Within the urban core of Vancouver, Canada, less than two kilometres apart, are two enclosed recreational sites which exhibit a marked range of similarities, as well as obvious differences. One is the Downtown Skateboard Plaza, ensconced below the hulking concrete arcs of two elevated vehicular viaducts, a grey, hard-surface space literally surrounded, above as well as on all sides, by the roar of traffic. The other is the Stanley Park Lawn Bowling Club, a garden-like venue on the edge of Vancouver's largest, mostly forested park, facing the blue, breezy waters of the Pacific Ocean. The Plaza is frequented by a comparatively youthful group of skateboarders, mostly male, while the Stanley Park Lawn Bowling Club is comprised of members who skew heavily toward an older, female demographic. The practical component of my thesis project, a 45-minute video documentary called *What Happyns*, is comprised largely of interviews recorded on these two sites with these two very different groups of people.

What Happyns was conceived of as in dialogue with two key French documentaries from the 1960s: *Chronique d'un été* (Dir. Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin) and *Le joli mai* (Dir. Chris Marker), where the filmmakers spoke with mostly working-class Parisians about their daily lives and employment, and whether they were happy in as much. These films were groundbreaking in their intent to take stock of contemporary French society by gauging the emotional well-being of everyday people. The time and space—Paris in the summer and spring of 1960 and 1962 respectively—serve as the setting for a larger existential examination of the post-war period. Setting out to document very different social contexts, *What Happyns* examines the viewpoints and values of two current groups of urban Vancouverites who occupy opposite ends of the adult age spectrum. Inviting members of each group to reflect upon their goals and aspirations, the film asks whether there are shared attitudes and ideals across the two groups, and how those ideals add meaning to the overall shape or understanding of their lives.

All interviews featured in *What Happyns* were conducted on-site at either the Skateboard Plaza or the Bowling Club, between May of 2010 and September of 2011. I worked with a camera operator in recording all the interviews, and the interview process itself was quite formalized,

with the interviewee seated, then asked to read each written question aloud, and answer as they wished. As the interview transpired, I attempted, not always successfully, to keep my own verbal interchange with the subject to a minimum.

My interview questions evolved slightly over the course of the recording period, but essentially employed an identical set of questions (see Appendix A) relating only discursively to the personal histories of the interview subjects, focusing instead upon social and ethical standards. Example questions are:

- What is meaningful work?
- Do you think it's true that most people live lives of quiet desperation?
- Are you happy?
- Do you believe in an afterlife?

My original intent was more focused on exploring what draws these people to attend the venue they do, what identity they derive from that attendance, and where that attendance and identity locates them in relation to society at large. It is possible to see both groups as subcultures; both as, to some degree, socially and economically marginalized, if for very different reasons.[1] I wanted to explore these dimensions, and to remain open to their variation as and when it became evident. More substantially though, I wanted to compare the values of these two groups of people, however those values might emerge and be described, and in so doing cause a viewer to reflect upon the decisions made by these subjects, both active and passive, in determining 'the arc' of their lives to date.

Although I wanted to pursue my study along something like traditional ethnographic film lines, I was not attempting to enact a genuinely empirical enquiry, despite the fact that the work was carried out in a relatively formal manner. Rather I was looking to conduct a personal

[1] The role assigned to the retired or elderly in mainstream Canadian society, when compared with the role assigned to elders in Native society, for example, can be said to generally entail reduced status and influence. So too is it generally known that skateboarders exist within a subcultural society with a history of marginalization; in fact, for a time—during the 1980s—of near outlaw status.

investigation into issues of broad 'common concern.' With this goal in mind, and working with some of the recent research findings on happiness from the field of Positive Psychology, I decided, part way through the recording process, to add voice-over commentary to the project. My hope was that my own reflections on these issues, coupled with the comments of the two subject sets, would ultimately help to shed some degree of light on how it is we all go about choosing the direction of our lives, and where it is we find happiness and significance within that chosen course.

Each life is a singularity, just as each society and age are unique; nevertheless these two groups of Vancouver residents in 2010/11, much like the inhabitants of Paris in the early '60s, offered the promise of a worthwhile exploration into how it is we find meaning in the course of our daily lives, and how this effort relates to notions of belonging, mastery, family, work, love, self, and death.

DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE

For many people, documentary is a surprisingly contentious field, one which has struggled toward definition. John Grierson, a British film producer who later became head of Canada's National Film Board, first used the term "documentary" in a review of Robert Flaherty's *Moana* for the *New York Sun* in 1926. He later described the documentary as "the creative treatment of reality," leaning definitively toward a view of documentary as an art form, indeed a poetic art form, as opposed to any form of scientific inquiry. Contrast this with Margaret Mead's admonition in favour of the observational camera as an ethnographic instrument:

> ...films that are acclaimed as great artistic endeavours get their effects by rapid shifts of the cameras and kaleidoscopic types of cutting. When filming is done only to produce a currently fashionable film, we lack the long sequences from one point of view that alone can provide us with unedited stretches of instrumental observation on which scientific work must be based. However much we may rejoice that the camera gives the verbally inarticulate a medium of expression and can dramatize contemporaneously an exotic culture for its own members and for the world, as anthropologists we must insist on prosaic, controlled, systematic filming and videotaping... (Mead 6)

David MacDougall, another noted anthropologist, has chafed against this type of attitudinal constriction: "Structural uses of film become too easily branded as scientifically suspect, the implication being that all but the simplest recording uses belong to the province of art" (MacDougall 423).

Skirmishing on a third front, Brian Winston has assailed Grierson's "creative treatment" definition by asserting that Grierson would have documentary avoid "social meaning" under the guise of art. Winston stresses documentary's traditional emphasis upon social values and issues, and considers that, under Grierson's definition, documentary becomes "obsessed with surface" as it flees from social meaning (Winston 221).

> I believe that running away from social meaning is what the Griersonian documentary, and therefore the entire tradition, does best. This one succinct phrase sums up the real price paid by the filmmakers' political pusillanimity. (Winston 42)

For Winston, documentary fails as it tries to be both art and science.

Describing a more nuanced approach to this polarity, Bill Nichols argues that documentary has, since the 1960s heyday of *cinema verité* (the synonymous American term is 'Direct Cinema') evolved into six identifiable "modes,"—poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative (Nichols 138). He derives these categories in large part by examining the procedural elements at work in documentary film production—the interview, whether formal or more dynamic, narration and voice-over, and observational versus more contrived recording practices. For the purposes of *What Happyns*, the two most salient elements, the two leading to the most contentious formal debates within my own practice, have to do with the interview, and use of voice-over narration.

With *What Happyns*, not without hesitation, I decided to employ the interview much more consistently than I have in any other project. My initial approach was exploratory, research-oriented, but I wanted to adopt an approach I viewed as 'local ethnography.'[2] That is, I borrowed from a formal approach that is central to both *Chronique d'un été* and *Le joli mai*. By making more extensive use of direct interviews with the subjects of the film, I hoped to be able to explore individual as well as slightly broader cultural conditions and histories. As the project proceeded, with even greater hesitation, I decided to employ my own voice-over as narration. These choices, which constitute an inclusion or representation of my own voice as an interlocutor, would determine the evolution of my project from exploration to expression, and helped complete a shift in emphasis from the ethnographic to the essayistic—a movement from something of a scientific interest in social or cultural conditions to a much more personal grappling with the content and intent of my filmic dialogues.

[2] I discuss what I mean by this term at greater length on page 12.

SITUATED PRACTICE

Documentary can be said to constitute precisely seven-eighths of the original film form. When the Lumière brothers convened the first public screening of motion pictures in Paris on December 28, 1895, just one of the eight titles they showed depicted an imagined scenario: *The Gardener*, wherein a mischievous boy steps on the watering hose of an unsuspecting gardener, and the world's first chase scene ensues. All seven other short films were what the Lumières termed *actualités*—real life observed through a static camera with a fixed, wide-angle lens. The quotidian content was clearly suggested by such titles as *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* and *Jumping Onto the Blanket.* Thus, and remarkably, with this screening the Lumières simultaneously founded the dramatic, comedic, and documentary film genres, beginning a developmental history that would soon splinter nonfiction film into a number of often controversial strands and modalities which would eventually prove problematic for practitioners and audience members alike.

My final thesis project developed within several of the nonfiction strands for which the seeds were planted in 1895, three in particular which I will label *the ethnographic*, *the quotidian*,[3] and *the essay*. This development was not linear; rather it involved a series of elliptical encounters with a number of filmic works, moments, ideas and inspirations. This thesis section will recount that series of encounters, and in the process provide both a critical/historical context for my final project, and an illumination of the emergent documentary process which led to its creation.

The Ethnographic Film

The earliest known instance of ethnographic filmmaking occurred in 1898, when the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition set off for the Torres Straits, near New Guinea, carrying still photography equipment, a wax-cylinder sound recorder, and a Lumière motion picture camera.

[3] I use this term as one synonymous with *ordinary*, but I have employed both terms in a particular way here, with a more precise definition presented on page 14.

Only a few minutes of the film they shot have survived, but the Expedition undoubtedly founded what would come to be known as "salvage" ethnographic filmmaking (Gruber 1). With this practice, ethnographic filmmakers had, in Margaret Mead's words, "accepted the responsibility of making and preserving records of the vanishing customs and human beings of this earth..." (Mead 3) The tradition, in both still and motion picture photography, would flourish institutionally well into the 1970s, under the social-scientific subfield of Visual Anthropology, although certainly by the mid 1970s, visual anthropologists were contending with a notable degree of censure resulting, essentially, from their practice being viewed as a vestige of colonialism.[4]

The practice of salvage ethnography took an abrupt and remarkably prescient turn, however, in the summer of 1960, when visual anthropologist Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin chose to shoot a documentary film looking at their own 'tribe,' the people of Paris.[5] The film they would produce, *Chronique d'un été*, would prove to have an "incontestable" influence on the history of documentary film (DiIorio 25). It would also supply direct inspiration for my thesis project. The specific inspiration can be found in Rouch and Morin's decision to send two women into the streets of Paris with a microphone, there to ask passers-by, "Are you happy?" Even more specifically, my inspiration can be found in the moment when an elderly man they approach replies in answer to the question, "I'm unhappy because I'm old."

It appears that most of the people the women attempted to accost avoided them, and Rouch and Morin soon abandoned this informal, delegated interview technique, instead conducting a series of arranged interviews with friends, acquaintances, or people to whom they had been introduced. Nevertheless, in beginning my thesis project, it seemed to me that the impulse to ask ordinary people if and why they were happy was a worthy one. I agreed with Sam DiIorio's assessment of Rouch and Morin's purpose in *Chronique*:

[4] See in particular Jean Rouch's contribution to the 1975 Hockings text cited.
[5] Up until that summer, Rouch's work had been solidly within both a colonial and salvage tradition. He had first travelled to Nigeria as a hydrologist in 1941, moving into ethnographic filmmaking by 1949, and by 1960 he had shot at least eight films in Africa.

> Although *Chronique* emphasizes bodies and faces, its individuals are never completely individualized. Rather than tell all, Rouch and Morin populate the film with semi-anonymous individuals in the hope of going beyond particularized truths and suggesting the reality of Paris as a whole. (DiIorio 27)

I felt that the ethnographic approach, brought to ordinary people in one's own neighbourhood, could reveal a broader set of experiences, disclosing not so much individual histories, or even social patterns, but inner lives. Moreover, I felt that Rouch and Morin's question about happiness provided a marker, a signpost pointing in the direction of interview questions of the same ilk as those found in the so-called 'Proust Questionnaire.'[6]

Subsequent enquiry into the conception of happiness led to the discovery of an intriguing contemporary analogue to Rouch and Morin's query: the burgeoning but still nascent field of Positive Psychology, which brings the scientific method to the study of psychologically and emotionally healthy humans, as opposed to those afflicted with a mental illness. Research from this field revealed that the elderly man interviewed in *Chronique* was anomalous; although researchers are not sure why, by almost any measure we are, on average, happier as we grow older.[7] This research would also provide me with a means of writing voice-over designed to knit the two subject groups together, and elevate the now three-way discussion to one about more than the mundane.

Chronique was also groundbreaking in its reliance upon the interview, beginning a trend which would continue until present day, when, in Jane Chapman's estimation, "the interview documentary" has become "the leading model for contemporary documentary" (Chapman 105). This emergence of the interview as an increasingly significant formal element in documentary is hardly surprising, coming as it did with the advent of portable 16 mm filmmaking technology. As with narration, however, the American Direct Cinema practitioners

[6] This is the set of questions answered by a young Proust in 1890, questions such as, 'Your idea of misery?' 'Your idea of happiness?' and 'Your favorite virtue?' I am indebted to Dr. Chris Jones for reminding me of this historic link.

[7] See especially the study cited and published online in 2010 by Stone et al.

tended to decry the interview as manipulative. Frederick Wiseman, who can be seen as the lasting champion of the Direct Cinema ethos, has, like Michael Moore and Errol Morris, been entirely uniform in the documentary format he employs. He has now created more than 40 major works, and each is within a strictly observational mode, without interviews or any asynchronous sound, in fact without any interaction between crew and subjects ever visible onscreen.

More than manipulative, the interview format is potentially deceitful. If the filmmaker so wishes, in all likelihood the interviewee can be presented putting forth the view of the filmmaker, without the filmmaker ever being seen or heard. Or, with the contextualizing power that comes with control of the edit, the interviewee can be made to simply sound more reasonable, more articulate and persuasive. Likewise an interviewee expressing views contrary to those of the filmmaker can be presented in a less favourable light. And all this with the consistent sheen of objectivity, with the authority of the filmmaker effectively masked. A more traditional journalistic approach of course allows for opposing views to be more equally expressed by a set of interviewees, and thus, as Chapman has reiterated, "A collection of interviews will serve to diffuse authority, so that the filmmaker effectively enters into a discourse which creates a gap between individual interviewees and the overall voice of the documentary" (Chapman 104). This, in my view, is the formal ideal, and moreover, inherent in this "gap," I would argue, is a valuable link to Rascaroli's "interstitial space," as I will discuss it here (Rascaroli 1).

Perhaps most innovative of *Chronique*'s many new directions is a sustained motif of self-reflexivity. In the opening moments of the film, Rouch and Morin appear, and Morin questions whether it is possible "to record a conversation naturally with a camera present." Later in the film, the filmmakers screen footage they have shot of their subjects for their subjects, while recording those subjects watching themselves on screen, and we see those subjects questioning their own authenticity while on camera. Immediately following this sequence, we again see the filmmakers, now discussing their subjects' reaction to seeing themselves, and

whether their own filmmaking process holds any validity. It is a multilayering that produces, for the viewer, a distancing between filmmakers and subjects, locating the viewer in a triangulated space where voyeuristic intimacy with the subject is neither traditionally nor easily achieved.

Like the "gap" just mentioned, this triangulated space parallels the "interstitial space" described by Rascaroli in reference to essayistic film and the employment of voice-over. For Rascaroli, this space exists:

> ...between the text on which [the voice-over] comments and the audience it addresses. In first-person and essayistic nonfiction, this sonic space becomes the place from which the spectator may establish a relationship with the speaking subjects and negotiate between the superimposed commentary and the images that are commented upon. (Rascaroli 2)

Figure 1. Rouch and Morin before the camera. From http://www.mitpressjournals.org/

Eventually, in creating my thesis project, I would come to accept the notion that voice-over could provide my project with a degree of "subjective critical reflection" that would in turn provide me with a comfortable, expressive space of my own (Rascaroli 2). But not before consideration of another work equally influential upon my own.

Le joli mai

Two years after Rouch and Morin shot *Chronique*, Chris Marker chose spring rather than summer to shoot a film called *Le joli mai*. Like Morin and Rouch, Marker began making his film by asking questions of people randomly selected on the streets of Paris, his own place of residence. He persisted with this informal interview approach for longer than did Morin and Rouch, but seemed drawn to questions of the same type, questions such as, "Would you rather have power or money?" and, "Are you happy?" The following is a transcription of an interview sequence from *Le joli mai* shot outside the Paris Stock Exchange.[8]

MARKER: May I ask how long you have been working here?

SUBJECT: Twenty-five years.

M: Do you like it?

S: It's my job.

M: But you like it?

S: Very much.

M: You chose it as a job?

S: No, when I left school I had no idea of coming here. I came here with a friend. I have never left it since.

M: What exactly do you do?

S: I'm a stockbroker.

M: May I put a broad question to you? What is money to you?

S: A means of existence.

[8] The interview subject, moments earlier, had objected to Marker interviewing two teenagers, dressed in business attire, who also worked at the Exchange, referring to them as "babies."

The conversation touches on two themes which would emerge as of abiding interest to me: the fact that the man's twenty-five-year career was unintentional, and that of his fatalistic attitude toward work as little more than "a means of existence."

As in the above exchange, Marker is regularly heard off screen in *Le joli mai*. Unlike Rouch and Morin he never delegates the interview process, and because of this is more consistently successful with his interviews than his compatriot predecessors. In the finished film he adds the element of an anonymous voice-over, spoken by an actor, in the English version Simone Signoret. With this, Marker can be said to contravene Rascaroli's 'first person' criterion for an essay film, but he nevertheless achieves, I would argue, Rascaroli's "interstitial space," similar in effect to that achieved by Rouch and Morin with their more overtly reflexive onscreen elements.

Local Ethnography

The Stanley Park Lawn Bowling Club is a part of my own neighbourhood. A bicycle path that I frequently use passes directly by the facility, and in my regular passings, I couldn't help but observe the pastoral beauty of the facility: the abundant flower gardens, the verdant lawns, the white clothing often worn by the members. I was also struck by a demographic among the membership which seemed to skew toward Anglo-European, elderly, and female. In much the same way Jeff Wall professes to be always wondering, as he moves about observing his environs, "Is there a picture there for me?" (*Picture Start*), as a documentary filmmaker, I was soon given to wonder if there was a documentary film there for me. The visual possibilities and ethnographic potential seemed too rich to ignore.

When I approached members of the Club, as is my research habit at that stage, I was looking for characters and story. I felt I might function there in a 'local ethnography' vein similar to that of *Chronique d'un été* and *Le joli mai.* I wondered whether I could explore, with camera and microphone, not a distant, exotic culture, but a local subculture with strong historical roots, one with particular dynamics turning upon gender, age and race. I wondered whether whatever

subculture I might discover at the Bowling Club was, if not vanishing, then changing fast, as was its surrounding city.

I was not wrong about supposing those conditions. In my initial visits (without camera or microphone), I discovered that the Club had been founded in 1917, that until recent decades there had been a Club regulation which decreed the wearing of white while on "the greens," that, unlike wider multicultural Vancouver, there were very few nonwhite members. The typical member was indeed elderly and female, even though the organizational history of the Club was patriarchal. [9]

In conducting a set of preliminary interviews at the Bowling Club over the summer season of 2010, I asked a series of questions relating to personal histories, as well as to what I referred to as 'life issues': love, marriage, work, family, death. Chief among these questions was, "Are you happy?" Although my intent with these initial interviews was obviously to go beyond traditional oral history, I was curious as to how the Club members understood their life histories. I wanted to explore the way they had constructed their lives, and in turn how they had gone about constructing happiness in their lives. Given the fatalistic, if not antagonistic[10] attitude toward work that was enunciated by many of the subjects in *Chronique* and *Le joli mai*, I also wanted to explore the attitudes toward work held by people who were no longer working. For this reason, the only strict criterion applied in the selection of my preliminary subjects was that they be retired.

This selective choice meant that almost all my interview subjects were roughly one generation older than myself, resulting in my seeing myself as 'nearby'[11] in race and age, if not gender, while at the same time, literally and figuratively, 'outside the Club' looking in. In the second

[9] Up until the summer of 1986, the Club was comprised of two autonomous clubs, Men's and Ladies (not Men's and Women's), with the Ladies Club paying lower fees, but paying part of their fees directly to the Men's Club.
[10] Especially Angelo in *Chronique* expresses antagonism toward his employers at the Renault factory.
[11] I use this term advisedly, in very loose homage to Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage*.

season of my interviews at the Club, I joined (and bowled with) the membership, mitigating but not eliminating some of the distance intrinsic in the observer-observed positions.

The Quotidian

Both Rouch/Morin and Marker, in shooting their films in Paris, had done more than just eschew the exotic locale; they had chosen to focus upon what I will refer to here as *the quotidian.* My employment of the term is quite narrow—I mean by it that they had deliberately sought out neither experts nor extraordinary events, that is they did not do precisely what most documentary filmmakers do. They did not interview authoritative or famous men or women, or people caught in the spotlight of historic or rare happenings; instead they chose to speak with unknown Parisians, many of them randomly selected, going about their daily lives. They spoke with citizens, that is city dwellers, and they did so in the immediate wake of the publication of the second volume of Henri Lefebvre's *Critique de la vie quotidienne,* a work that would exert strong philosophical influence on the unrest which erupted in Europe in the month of May, 1968. There is an undercurrent of unhappiness running beneath the lives of the Parisian citizens interviewed in *Chronique* and *Le joli*, and it runs not far beneath the visual surface of both films.

As suggested in my Introduction, the quotidian filmic strand too can be traced back to the Lumière brothers, but the impulse toward selection of 'the ordinary'[12] has been followed by a number of other documentary filmmakers since. Errol Morris did so in an early work titled *Vernon, Florida* (1981), where he interviewed individuals who may be considered eccentric, but who certainly are not extraordinary in terms of their abilities or their accomplishments. Morris's approach in the film can be seen as ethnographic, but it is an especially loose, home-grown ethnography; he is never heard, and it appears that he is content to simply let his subjects talk, whether it be about turkey hunting, a resident's suicide, or a pet turtle. The

[12] Beyond the narrow definition I employ, my own subjects were of course not 'ordinary' at all. They were select, both as a result of belonging to one of the two groups I investigated, and of my own careful selection process. What's more, many of them were dropped from the extended interview process, and did not appear in the final film, making those who did even more select.

portion of local culture presented in *Vernon, Florida* is individualistic, elderly, and mostly male-derived, suggesting more than anything an economic and political climate of disengagement. Morris depicts a psychological hinterland where "lucidity intersects with delusion" (Scott C8).

Most noteworthy of all, in my view, when dealing with the dimension of the quotidian, is Michael Apted's *Up Series*. Apted's series is arguably unique in the history of documentary film, tracking the lives of a group of British subjects who, if not for the series, would be unknown, and doing so from 1964 until the present day. The seven-year-old children selected as subjects in 1964 were intentionally chosen from across a socio-economic, that is a 'class' spectrum, with the intent of determining the influence of social status over time. Interestingly, that original focus has shifted for Apted as time has passed, and he readily admits as much. Joe Moran, in a 2002 article in *Screen*, quotes Apted as recognizing, following the 1986 release of *28 Up*, that he:

> ...hadn't made a political film at all, but a humanistic document about the real issues of life — about growing up; about coming to terms with failure, success, disappointment; about issues of family and all the things that everybody can relate to. (Moran 390)

I would suggest that, once Apted's camera was turned toward ordinary people, and once the scope of his examination was extended over a multi-decade time frame, the emergence of a focus upon these broader 'life issues,' as opposed to more immediate political-economic issues (for instance) was inevitable.

At the conclusion of the lawn bowling season of 2010, after reviewing the footage I had recorded there, I was struck by the indiscriminate mechanisms at work in the way that individuals had determined the course of their lives. Like the stockbroker outside the Paris Exchange, rarely it seemed had my subjects attempted to carefully plot, then execute the events of their lives, or, in the few instances where they had attempted to do so, rarely were those plans successful. That fall I was first given to reflect upon the significance of John Lennon's lyric, "Life is what happens when we're busy making other plans," which then

provided the title (*What Happens*) for the interim work exhibited in the *Upon Occasion* show at ECUAD in July of 2011.

It has been suggested that a cumulative viewing of the entire *Up Series* is a "metaphysical" experience (Ebert). Viewed collectively the series has a scope unmatched by any other time-based material I have watched; viewing it caused me to look for a way to attempt something similar in dimension with my documentary. Because a longitudinal study of the sort Apted achieved in his series was unavailable to me, it occurred to me that I could take the same set of questions I had been asking of elderly people at the Lawn Bowling Club, and ask them of a much more youthful set of skateboarders at the Downtown Skateboard Plaza, a similarly sheltered recreational venue equidistant from my home, in the opposite direction.[13] In doing so I could hope to close the demographic distance between the two groups, collapse the immense story time of the *Up Series* within the space of one city.

Over the winter months of 2010-11, I interviewed a group of skateboarders with a demographic average that skewed heavily toward male, younger, and mixed race. Given my age, and the fact that I was not about to take up skateboarding, the inherent distancing between myself behind and my subjects before the camera was undoubtedly greater at the Plaza, but in conducting these interviews, I sensed that the identical set of questions largely bridged the gap between the two generations, with my own positioned somewhere in between. In fact, the skateboarders were typically less guarded in their responses than were the bowlers, and it seemed to me, speculatively, that this was in part *because* of the greater distancing of our positions.[14]

The Essay Film

The essay film has a developmental history even more indeterminate than what I have called the quotidian film. It has a distinctly French flavour, with its most recognizable literary origin in

[13] Here I am indebted to my classmate Bruce Emmett for the inspirational link.

[14] Unlike some of the lawn bowlers, none of the skateboarders I approached declined to be interviewed.

the writings of Michel de Montaigne (1533-92). In cinematic form, André Bazin's 1958 characterization of Chris Marker's *Letter From Siberia* as an "essay film" is a key historical moment. Historically critical as well is Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1955), where the interstitial audience space is created within a triangulation among Jean Cayrol's poetic narration, the floating imagery of the abandoned Nazi death camps, and the archival footage of the camps' wartime horrors. The interstitial space in *Night and Fog* cannot be occupied comfortably, but nor should it be.

As with its literary forebearer, the essay film has been notoriously resistant to clear categorization. Aldous Huxley described the prose essay as "a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything" (2). Timothy Corrigan has described "the essayistic" film as "a kind of encounter between the self and the public domain, an encounter that measures the limits and possibilities of each as a conceptual activity" (6). Although Corrigan admits that essay films "have always been difficult to classify, sometimes difficult to understand, and often difficult to relate to each other" (5), he encompasses both Erroll Morris's *Fog of War* and Michael Moore's *Sicko* within the genre. Rascaroli resists this kind of diverse inclusion, writing that Marker's *Sans Soleil* and Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* "have very little in common aside from their extensive voice-overs, and the fact that they both present problems of classification" (Rascaroli 22). Rascaroli's delineation of the essay form emphasizes the personal and subjective, albeit a more broadly based or social subjectivity. She points out that the essayistic tradition consists in large part of the "skeptical evaluation" of worldly phenomena, both private and public, and that, inevitably, such skepticism must self-reflexively include the author's own conclusions (23).

Final context for my work can be found in Ross McElwee's voice-over laden essay films, especially *Sherman's March* (1986), *Time Indefinite* (1993) and *Bright Leaves* (2003). McElwee's films are personal explorations of 'life issues' within his own family and community. The commentary accompanying his retrospective show at MoMA states that McElwee makes "the grandest themes of human comedy his artistic province: love and death, chance and fate,

memory and denial" (Siegel). Michael Renov has situated McElwee's practice even closer to home than one's neighbourhood, calling his films "domestic ethnography" (Renov 1).

Figure 2. McElwee before and behind the camera. From http://rossmcelwee.com/

My own process in creating *What Happyns* had originally been rooted in the *cinema verité* tradition of documentary, arguably with its roots in *Chronique d'un été*, but more rigorously manifest in the American Direct Cinema practices espoused by documentary pioneers Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, Albert and David Mayles, and D. A. Pennebaker—most notably their admonition against the use of voice-over narration in documentary film. Here is Pennebaker in a 1971 interview:

> It's possible to go to a situation and simply film what you see there, what happens there, what goes on, and let everybody decide whether it tells them about any of those things... you don't have to label them, you don't have to have narration to instruct you so you can be sure and understand that it's good for you to learn. You don't need any of that shit. (Levin 116)

Thus, in my initial 'local ethnographic' approach to the Bowling Club, I had been disinclined to the possibility of voice-over, but, in reviewing the interview material garnered from the Skateboard Plaza, I found myself, like McElwee, looking for a personal voice which would add a

unifying layer to the combined material, in a way that would open up the interstitial audience space described by Rascaroli, a place where an audience member would ultimately be engaged in their own degree of self-reflection. This thought process had me then conceiving of *Chronique* as more of an essay film, less of as an ethnographic documentary, a conceptual repositioning that represented a reversal of my earlier perception of that film.

A Rhetorical End

The three strands of documentary film I have identified here are clearly not most productively viewed, from a critical standpoint, as mutually exclusive. Even in my own process, as described here, I've viewed *Chronique d'un été* as both an ethnographic and an essay film. From the outset I've maintained an interest in the strand I have termed *the quotidian*, and that too can be seen as a central construct in *Chronique*. Marker's *Le joli mai*, with its increased deployment of voice-over, can be more readily labelled an essay film, but so too in that work has he continued the focus on the quotidian.

My interest in 'life issues' has similarly been present from the outset, initially spurred by what I felt, intuitively, was a valuable, though procedurally flawed impulse on the part of Rouch and Morin in asking ordinary people, "Are you happy?" That impulse on my part was reinforced by Marker's taking up of the same approach in *Le joli mai*, and by Michael Apted's recognition of what he was more implicitly exploring in *The Up Series*.

The choice to employ voice-over in my project was influenced by Chris Marker more than anyone else, but also in large part by Ross McElwee's ability to knit together highly diverse elements, spatially and temporally, with a highly personal and subjective style of narration that nevertheless seems to comfortably, figuratively enclose the audience in a small room with the filmmaker. To this end, my final choice regarding pronoun use in the voice-over for my project was to employ the more inclusive first person plural 'we,' as opposed to the singular 'I' used in this text.

Happiness as a 'social science' phenomenon aided in this pronoun choice, allowing me to use the collective term (we) implicit in the now extensive Positive Psychology research.[15] It also provided me with a verbal vehicle to frame many of the 'life issues' I am concerned with, a way to create an integrative form of voice-over that would in turn create Rascaroli's interstitial space. As such, Rascaroli's essay on *Sonic Interstices* has provided me with a final, much valued framework of conceptual support. In it she states that the essayistic filmmaker "does not speak to an anonymous audience. The argument of the essay film addresses a real, embodied spectator, who is invited to enter into a dialogue with the enunciator in the construction of meaning" (Rascaroli 2). She further asserts that "the essayist asks many questions and only offers few or partial answers" (3).

Many of the questions I asked of my documentary subjects must indeed be considered rhetorical, that is questions without prescriptive answers. My intent then is to create content which is self-reflexive to the extent that I do not wish to offer directional answers to the types of questions I want to raise. My hope, rather, is to create an invisible space where subject, author and audience member can meet within the context of a valuable, mutually self-reflexive discourse.

[15] The World Database of Happiness, under the direction of Ruut Veenhoven, is remarkably extensive.

METHODOLOGY

William Guynn has argued that the documentary process, in all phases of production and exhibition—

> —from the constitution of cinema as technique of production, to the shooting of footage, to the editing and mixing, to its ultimate projection and consumption under the conditions imposed by the cinematic institution—is a distortion of the field of reality that documentary film claims to represent to the spectator. There is no such thing as unmediated representation... (Guynn 42)

Rouch, in his writings, has made it clear that he considers any form of cinematic observation, regardless of its subject or approach, as inescapably ethnocentric— "... the very fruit of that intellectual imperialism which comes from the fact that we can only see others with our own eyes and with our own concepts" (Rouch 86).

Once again I quote the above by way of reminding myself and the reader of the contentious nature of the field I operate in. Prickly questions abound at every turn, and it can presumably be usefully asked whether it is possible to arrive at a definition of what constitutes a documentary film that would allay, if not put an end to some of these; questions such as whether it is ethical to pay documentary subjects, or whether re-enactment is a legitimate element within the documentary form. More generically, the question can be articulated by asking, for instance, whether Errol Morris, with his diverse array of documentary tools, is as effective at conveying the truth as is Frederick Wiseman, with his rigorously observational methods? Or by asking whether the dramatic filmmaker is more free to tell the truth, any truth, with his narrative feet set in an imaginary world, than is the documentary filmmaker, standing with her feet set in the terra firma of reality?

In my practice I've seen the documentary format variations as means rather than ends, as tools for the expression of an observed but still subjective truth. The formal questions remain however. The issue of voice-over can be framed within questions as to the validity of an authorial voice which might nonetheless provide a nonauthoritarian interstitial space, as Rascaroli describes it. The essay film can be queried as to its elasticity, whether the

pronounced expansiveness of the form in fact results in reduced substance, akin to the proverbial tennis game with no lines drawn on the court, but more germane questions for my purposes relate to subjectivity. Does the personal subjective voice, issued via voice-over, allow for a nonpedantic, nonpedagogical expression of a meaningful truth beyond the assailed reality-based truths of the documentary form? A self-reflexive quality necessarily emerges in simply questioning the form, but it must also be asked why ask these questions? If many of the questions I am working with might be thought of as rhetorical, then we might wonder how the act of local ethnography can escape being little more than the ethnographic eye turned inward. Does it become what Carolyn Ellis calls, "the ethnographic I"? (Ellis)[16]

A Study in Contrasts

When I first determined to interview patrons of the Skateboard Park as well as lawn bowlers, the stark visual contrast between the two locales was instantly appealing. They could hardly be more visually dissimilar, one favouring the verdant, the garden; the other utterly devoid of anything living and green; one pastoral, the other urban. The overhead bulk of concrete viaducts at the Plaza is equally contradictory to the towering trees and open sky which abut and rise above the Lawn Bowling Park. The near monochromatic colour palette at the Plaza stands opposed to the vibrant array of colours present in the many flower gardens maintained by Bowling Club members. But there are striking physical similarities as well; both places are noisy; in fact we had more audio recording problems in Stanley Park than we had at the Plaza. Both places are also isolated just beyond the established bounds of commercial and residential neighbourhoods, and the backdrops of both speak to this isolation, a kind of literal marginalization.[17] In my interviews, I hoped to be able to query whether the marked visual discrepancy between the two sites pointed to a noticeable 'values gap' between the two

[16] This is the title of Ellis's 2004 book, cited below.

[17] When it was constructed in 2004, the Skateboard Park was deliberately located away from existing commercial and residential neighbourhoods, and it's interesting to note that, as central Vancouver development has continued, those neighbourhoods are again closing in around the Park, raising the possibility of further displacement.

groups, or whether less visible recreational, psychological and social parallels led back to some degree of shared standards.

Figure 3. Sunshine and shadow on 'the greens.' *What Happyns* video still frame.

Given documentary's long history of privileging the extraordinary, it must also be asked why a focus on the quotidian, as I've described it? What is it in the experiences of the ordinary that cannot necessarily be found in the exceptional, whether that be people or events? Is it possible to gain as much from querying the unknown representative, as from the famous, or famously successful individual?

Happiness

Happiness appeared for most of my subjects, to be a means toward contextualizing either 'the story of their lives,' or their current position within a broader society perceived as existing along a spectrum from at best arbitrary, to uncaring, to at worst corrupt. In referencing the etymological root of *happens* I was struck to see that it shares a linguistic origin with 'happy'—having to do with luck, or lucky.[18] (So evolved the final hybrid spelling of the title of my project:

[18] I also immediately thought of Beckett, in my mind master of the quotidian writ large, and the pivotal character in *Waiting for Godot* named Lucky.

What Happyns.) You are much more likely to be happy if you are lucky enough to happen to be born in Denmark, or Costa Rica, than if you are unlucky enough to happen to be born in Zimbabwe. You are much more likely to be happy if you are lucky enough to happen to be born into a loving, supportive family, than if you are unlucky enough to happen to be born into a dysfunctional or abusive family. And then, as Bruce, one of my documentary subjects, points out, there is the critical role of "events." If you are lucky, events beyond your control will not negatively or catastrophically affect your life, and you are liable to be happy. But if life can change in an instant, what are we to make of it, here and now?

Figure 4. The overhead bulk at the Plaza. *What Happyns* video still frame.

Given the reactive way my interview subjects assembled or were assembling their life stories, and given the profound 'luck factor' that seemed to play into the likelihood of their happiness (as they understood it), *What Happyns* asks viewers to consider how is it that we formulate meaning in our lives? In studying the many correlates of happiness—age, gender, geography, wealth, social relationships, etc.—I wanted the film to explore some of the issues which provided ordinary people, in ordinary circumstances with the values and knowledge they needed in order to be comfortable sharing their histories, thoughts and opinions. In selecting my interview subjects, I spoke with a number of people associated with the venues where I

would do my interviews, about other possible subjects. A number of the people I was referred to declined to be interviewed. As well, I abandoned certain subjects after a first, preliminary interview, going on to interview most of my final participants three times. Thus part of my rationale for pursuing the investigative goal I've just described was to believe that those of whom I would be asking the most pertinent questions would in fact be more secure in who they are, and in discussing the choices they made in shaping their lives.

Finally, to illuminate the issues at the heart of my enquiry, I return to the variable of age, in part because, of all the correlates of happiness, age is the one which varies most between my two groups of subjects. The research done by positive psychologists has demonstrated conclusively that, on average, we grow happier as we grow older, and I wonder why. I have said in the voice-over for my project that, "We are relieved of the burden of the future" as we age, but what, more precisely, is that burden, and how is brought to bear?

CONCLUSION

Every documentary filmmaker functions under an obligation to 'tell the truth,' that is to represent reality accurately, but then so does every dramatic filmmaker. Both must draw directly from life as they have experienced it, and both are obliged to depict that experience fairly. Dramatic filmmakers may treasure the freedom that the imagination provides them, referencing a greater 'emotional truth' for each bit of fakery they put on a screen, but dramatic storytellers have always lied at a regular rate, and honourably so. Dragging forth just one phrase from the hallowed halls of storytelling should make that much wholly evident: "They lived happily ever after." Would that it were ever so.

The blending of fictional and factual forms has to do with more than the impingement of narrative structure, or any particular relationship with the real. In the case of the essay film, I would argue that the meaning flows precisely *because* of the blending of the categories. A personal, subjective narration immediately renders the film a hybrid form, but both root forms are expanded in the process, with a discursive triangulation of creator, content and viewer produced, as opposed to the more linear configuration of creator to content to viewer extant in 'pure' fiction or documentary. It is worth noting that conventional documentary film, perhaps more so than any other medium, attempts to draw the viewer's attention exclusively to the content, away from what Pennebaker would likely consider "the artfulness" of the form itself.[19]

Money and Happiness

Despite the sharp visual contrast between the two sites, it was soon apparent, in my interviews, that both groups expressed a similarity of views around particular values, the correlation of money and happiness for instance. Almost of necessity, the thinner experiential base below the skateboarders caused their views to occasionally sound superficial, but nevertheless, it was interesting to hear the shared values expressed across the divide between two groups at either end of the adult age spectrum. Social and recreational factors seemed important to both

[19] Pennebaker says in the same 1971 interview quoted earlier: "The trouble with documentary is it really requires a lot of artfulness, and most people making documentaries, for one reason or another, feel embarrassed at being artful."

groups, congruent with the findings of Positive Psychology that happy people are more likely to be members of a club, and that recreation is often a greater source of happiness for people than is vocation. Identity appeared to be a more important attractive factor for skateboarders, as might be expected with a younger, often adolescent, perhaps more idealistic demographic, but it is noteworthy that this stronger group identity crosses greater ethnic diversity in the skateboarding cohort than it does with the lawn bowlers.

In integrating the interview material from the two groups, setting them one frame apart for the first time, as I did in my rough cut, I again felt that what I have termed 'the quotidian' factor belied whatever cultural and visual differences were present. In creating *What Happyns*, I wanted to move beyond image, pop culture, politics, social issues, activism, even religion, to investigate issues more broadly relevant to the lives of ordinary people. The extraordinary among us—the highly talented, the greatly successful, the true overachievers—typically acknowledge the luck factor in their accomplishment; they were, with their enhanced abilities, in the right place at a critical time.[20] Also notable is how often these people, whether they be Vincent van Gogh or Oprah Winfrey, seem driven by past trauma, and how often they are willing to work to an extent which brings obvious negative social consequences. They frequently possess a heightened competitive drive. My rationale for an interest in the quotidian questions these exceptional people as models for success. Emulating or aspiring to the paradigm of the extraordinary is undoubtedly a source of unhappiness for many people, especially for younger people. Looking to the happiness found in the average elder seems to me a far more promising vein. Elderly people are happier *despite* the arbitrary role played by good fortune, and the predictably indiscriminate manner in which they have assembled their lives. Their lives are happy accidents, with far greater commonality.

The validity of the interview is founded upon the relationship built via that interview, and like happiness, it is augmented by time. As Errol Morris has pointed out in an interview with Charlie Rose, "Interviewing *is* a human relationship," (emphasis added), and, "The most powerful

[20] Dustin Hoffman's Oscar acceptance speech in 1980 is a noteworthy illustration of this acknowledgement.

interviews are not adversarial." Rose, who has, quite incredibly, conducted in excess of 50,000 interviews in his career, agrees with Morris in the same interview just quoted, stating that the critical purpose of the interview is "to not look to confirm a thesis, but to discover;" at Mike Wallace's suggestion, to illuminate.

The local ethnographic film form can be justified in similar manner, via its approach. Reflexivity, however it is manifest, can mean the creation of a triangulated discourse, where useful questions are asked, and a diversity of answers is encouraged. The essay film, in turn, functions as an art form like any other; the advantage of the motion picture medium is that time makes possible a conversation, a conversation where the audience member need not be thought of only as a passive, unknown viewer. Rather the audience member can be metaphorically conceived of by the documentary filmmaker as a guest at the same dinner table where filmmaker and subject are conversing.

Undoubtedly, the documentary process, as I've envisioned it, involves the evaluation of people, events and circumstances, then a judgement as to the inherent 'truth' of that situation, and then a consistent effort to accurately portray that particular but individual judgement. At the same time I've seen the perceived confines, the defining elements of dramatic versus documentary film as so complex, so shifting and illusory as to make any categorical distinguishing relationship with the real or truthful essentially meaningless. Simply put, I would argue that dramatic and documentary film exist along a single spectrum, with hybrid forms occupying a middle ground, but that it quickly becomes frivolous to attempt to determine precisely where that hybrid ground begins and ends.

I recall hearing someone interviewed on the radio whose professional business it was to be present for the death of others. She commented on how there were few consistencies in these final circumstances; very often the dying have slipped into an altered consciousness where the grieving aren't sure whether to advise their loved one to hang on or let go. She did however observe one pattern: women, in their last moments, often 'see' their mother. Men, at least for

the generation she was working with, often 'see' their home as they return to it at night, a lighted space where their family awaits. While we might question the universality of this gender difference, it seems that in the end what invariably matters to us are others, those whom we have loved, those who have cared about our own happiness.

The burden of the future has to do with attainment. As younger people we ask whether it is better to excel at a practice, be it art or medicine or mechanics, than it is to be a good mother, or a good husband. As younger people we struggle to achieve, but what is the nature of that achievement? No one dies wishing they had achieved more, except in so far as that achievement has brought them greater love. We die asking simply, 'Was I loved?' Narrative form, whether documentary or dramatic, should tell us that the assembling of our lives is a love story, the greatest story we will ever tell, and in telling the story, we are all obliged to tell the truth.

A REFLECTIVE CHAPTER

In rereading my thesis, and with the benefit of my completed film behind me, it seems to me that the contention with the documentary sub-genres I discuss (the ethnographic, the quotidian and the essay) can be profitably viewed as an ongoing contention with the audience. In retrospectively tracking my progress from ethnographic to essay filmmaking, a number of insights can be identified which offer comment on both the process of documentary filmmaking, and my own efforts at organizing content in alternate forms. Certain of these insights may now be viewed as foreseeable; others as intrinsically valuable to the creative process as pursued by myself, or indeed as pursued by others working in a variety of media.

I came to the ECUAD MAA program after many years spent in a client-based process, where, inevitably, at least one client was financing the project in a way that allowed them creative input, sometimes decisive creative input. I also came from years working with dramatic film, narrative structure, and the 'tyrannical' audience expectations that come with conventional storytelling.[21] This all meant that when I enrolled in the MAA program I was free for the first time in many years to create with myself in mind as primary audience, and to escape what I have referred to as 'the tyranny of story.' Accordingly, as I began the project, I wanted to pursue an ethnographic form of documentary that eschewed story, that is plot in particular, in favour of character and place, specifically the Stanley Park Lawn Bowling Club.

I first visited the Club in the spring of 2010 to do a set of preliminary interviews, asking a fairly standard set of questions about personal histories. I never intended to use this material; it was recorded in order to determine a subset of interviewees that I would return to with a very different set of questions. As described earlier, these different questions were inspired expressly by Rouch and Morin's original impulse to ask in *Chronique d'un été*, 'Are you happy?' These broader questions were of greater interest to me, if only because they offered a more novel, promising path of enquiry.

[21] I first published a book in 1998 entitled, *The Tyranny of Story: Audience Expectations and the Short Screenplay.*

My early research saw me comparing *Chronique* and *Le jolie mai* with classic 'exotic' ethnographic films like *Dead Birds* and *To Live With Herds.* Phillip Lopate, in a foreword to Robert Gardner's 2007 book about the making of *Dead Birds*, has written a remarkably concise summation of the many problems associated with traditional anthropologic filmmaking:

> Filmmakers risk being unable to satisfy the often contradictory demands of anthropology as science and cinema. They face the danger of sentimentalizing or patronizing the group being studied by overemphasizing the exotic or folkloric elements of a culture. They may insufficiently register cultural change in order to present a romantic picture of the "primitive." They may be tempted to distort reality—or accused of having done so—by staging re-enactments or instigating events, or by scrambling chronologies and spatial contexts through editing. They may alter a group's behavior by the camera's presence, or introduce objects and technologies from the developed world that destabilize traditional cultures and economies. They may intervene inappropriately in rituals, or not intervene when to do nothing borders on the immoral. Guilt comes with the territory of documentary and ethnographic cinema. (Gardner xiv)

By focusing on the local as opposed to the exotic, both *Chronique* and *Le jolie mai* arguably escaped such guilt, but, as noted, their subsequent sub-genre lineage is scant, and not without reason. A filmmaker shunning the audience appeal of both the exotic and the extraordinary cannot rightly expect to reach an audience as broad as might be expected for a work which, despite the many problems described above, embraces the unusual or alien.

This was a narrowing of the audience I was prepared for, indeed prepared to welcome, in beginning work on my film. Nevertheless, during the 2010 summer residency of the MAA program, even I as primary audience was feeling unsatisfied with the material I was recording at the Bowling Club. It seemed to somehow lack the scope I was seeking, both intellectually and aesthetically. During this same summer session, my classmate Bruce Emmett spoke about the Plaza Skateboard Park, its history and culture, and it occurred to me that here was a similarly enclosed recreational space, still local, which was in effect another 'club.' But a club with a much different demographic and look. Taking my set of interview questions to the Skateboard

Park would allow me to explore whatever wider dimensions might be offered by this very dissimilar population and setting.

Thus, as I have described, over the winter of 2010-2011 I conducted a set of interviews at the Skateboard Park, employing an identical set of questions to that which I had asked at the Lawn Bowling Club. In doing so, for the first time, I felt confident that the project was gaining momentum, proceeding in a richer, more rewarding direction.

It soon seemed, however, that I was not out of the creative woods just yet. In cutting together the material from both venues over the spring of 2011, I was soon feeling dissatisfied again. The material from the two venues appeared to 'speak' one to the other in an interesting dialogue of sorts, but without the additional 'lift' I was aspiring toward, falling too frequently into homily, or idiosyncrasy, even banality. I began, for the first time, to consider the prospect of my own voice-over as an integrative element.

I have described above my reluctance to take this step, for reasons which anyone familiar with the history of documentary will know of. *Dead Birds* is again a useful example here, as Robert Gardner himself has written that he now considers his voice-over for that film often "too heavy and occasionally arch." (Gardner 126)

For the summer exhibition of 2011, still in a thoroughly experimental mode, I cut together a long, completely random sequence of clips from both sources, eschewing not only story, but in this instance character as well. I chose to not concern myself with introducing or developing any of the various characters I had recorded at either venue. If a subject had something to say which I considered worth including, and she popped up just one time to say it, never appearing again, so be it; I would include that single clip. Consistent with my original intent, I used very little if any of the personal history material from the first set of interviews. Damn the audience; full speed ahead. As just stated, I considered this effort an open experiment, and before long I

considered it a failed experiment. As primary audience, I again felt insufficiently engaged by this manifestation of my recorded material.

In the wake of the summer exhibition, I made the decision to move ahead with my own voice-over as narration for the final piece. I looked upon this decision as one wherein I was choosing—to a degree at least—to 'come out from behind the camera,' that is from the comparatively safe obscurity of a position behind the camera. Uncomfortable as I was in doing so, it felt like a courageous choice, and therefore likely a worthy one, encompassing a greater degree of self-reflexivity. In concurrent discussions with Dr. Glen Lowry, my Supervisor, it arose that perhaps what I was attempting to create was an essay film, voice-over being one of the defining features of an essay film. As mentioned in the body of my thesis, this reconceiving of my final work as an essay film also felt right, and led to my reading several books on essay films, specifically books by Timothy Corrigan and Laura Rascaroli. The Rascaroli text led me to a paper by her on the interstitial sonic space created by voice-over, a conception which, although idealized, allowed me, for the first time, to think of voice-over in a way that I was comfortable with.

In my 'post-random' editing, I was working with the notion of structuring the film thematically, that is according to the topics focused upon in my later interview questions. Voice-over would aid in creating this kind of structure, but it would also allow me to still avoid any reliance upon story structure. A rough cut I completed in the spring of 2012 employed voice-over (drawing largely upon the findings of Positive Psychology) and such a thematic structure. In screening that cut for several people, I felt it was considerably closer to a successful form, but still short of the fully integrated piece I was striving for.

While continuing to edit the material, it occurred to me that none of the strategies I had been pursuing—thematic, anti-story, random—needed to be mutually exclusive. I recalled a time during the first year of the program, when Dr. Chris Jones had suggested that my virtual studio might benefit from some video. In response I assembled three brief video sequences featuring

lawn bowlers who had related interesting personal histories during my first set of interviews—the interviews I did not intend to use in a final version. I further recalled that the broader audience (excluding me, with my preconceived choices) had offered marked positive response to those sequences, certainly more so than they had to the random assemblage I completed for the summer of 2011.

A final 'light' switched on for me. Within the usual documentary post production process, there is a hallowed time when the filmmaker is simply looking at the recorded material without any preconceptions, looking to see which moments are most revealing, which have the most to say, regardless of whether it seems they may or may not integrate well with any other chosen moment. It struck me that I could return to this process without fear. If those historical sequences from my first set of interviews were the most compelling for an audience which included myself and others, then that was material I should be using. And using this material did not mean that I couldn't still work thematically later within the work, in fact building upon character and story in order to do so.

The result was a creative breakthrough and the final structure extant in *What Happyns*, where an extended early sequence presents selected characters and personal histories, and where the latter portions of the work focus on thematic concerns, building upon the characters already presented. It is a structure I am finally creatively satisfied with, and one that, although possibly unnecessarily arduous in its arrival, for myself at least, manages to effectively integrate character, story and theme.

Having achieved that much, I chose to screen this version for an amalgamated group of my interview subjects, and to shoot this event as 'bookend' sequences to the main body of my film. This was a choice I viewed as an extension of my earlier one to employ voice-over, and a choice which also extended my dialogue with *Chronique d'un été*. More than coming out *from behind* the camera, these bookends set me *in front of* the camera, then, as a very last element, had me

being asked a question—being interviewed—by one of my subjects. For me, it amounted to a concluding tip of the creative hat to the remarkable reflexive elements first seen in *Chronique*.

Since that initial, 'amalgamated' screening of *What Happyns*, the completed film has also been presented, mostly for seniors, in a number of community settings—at a Community Centre, and within several post-secondary classrooms. This type of community-based screening is perhaps the optimal form of its presentation, allowing the work to function as a discussion piece, where values, choices and insights can be debated within a non-judgmental, non-competitive context removed for the time from the pressures of work, family, longer-term aspirations or immediate goals. Ideally, *What Happyns* prompts an enjoyable, confident discussion from which viewers go home feeling encouraged, if not altogether content.

Ultimately, it is possible to question whether the completed version of *What Happyns* is indeed an essay film. My own contention would be that, in so far as the film focuses on neither *portrait* (of a people, place or culture) nor *story* (as in a series of events), it occupies a place within the hybrid formal ground of the essay film as described above. The voice-over in the film is *individualized*, if not always fully personal, and its subjectivity can be seen—overall—to have drawn myself as filmmaker to a point at least 'beside' if not in front of the camera.

The final insight for me in this entire process was then one I had gained long ago, a lesson I knew from the start. A rich creative vein can be mined in the fertile ground which runs between story and anti-story; worthy invention can be found in the tension felt between content and form. At no time, however, is it necessary to oppose the material, to preconceive form and attempt to impose it. Rather the artist can simply relax, listen to the material, embrace the tension and allow it to give birth to a new child. Be still, and allow the material to say—usually quietly—where it needs to go.

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Appendix A

The Interview Questions

Origins
Where and when were you born?
What are your strongest memories of your years growing up?
How would you describe yourself?

Work
How important is work?
What is meaningful work?
When should a person retire?

Love/Marriage/Family
Tell me about your experiences in falling in love.
What's more important, friends or family? Why?
What's the key to a happy childhood?
What's the key to being a good parent?

Age
What do you think about the role our society typically assigns people who are retired?
What do you think about the role our society typically assigns young people?
What do you think young people have to offer the rest of us?
What do you think the elderly have to offer the rest of us?

Death
Do you read the obituaries?
Is it possible to live too long?
Are you afraid of death?
Do you believe in an afterlife?
How would you like your epitaph to read?

Wisdom
What's the best decision you ever made?
What's your biggest regret?
What's your opinion on young people today/the old people of today?
What do you enjoy most in your life?
What's the biggest lesson life has taught you?
What's the most important thing in life?
How do you feel about the future of the planet?

Sayings

Please give me your reaction to:

The end justifies the means.

He who has the most toys, wins.

No one ever died regretting they didn't spend more time in the office.

Life with another person is always difficult.

Youth is wasted on the young.

Old age is no place for sissies.

Money can't buy happiness.

Most people live lives of quiet desperation.

Be here now.

Do what you're afraid to do.

Life is not fair.

Life is not a dress rehearsal.

General

Do you set goals?

Do you see yourself as a part of society?

Are you happy?

Do you feel that you're free?

What does success mean to you?

Who is a hero to you?

What quality do you most admire in a person?

What would be the worst thing that could happen to you?

Appendix B

What Happyns is available for online viewing at the below website address. Please contact the ECUAD Graduate Studies office or Ric Beairsto for the necessary password.

http: //vimeo.com/48257117