



Reflective Subjectivity in Audiovisual Nonfiction: Empowering Global South Media Makers and Decolonizing Storytelling

Moses Parlindungan Ompusunggu¹

¹ Independent Researcher and Filmmaker
sinemakata@gmail.com

Abstract. This study explores the application of reflective subjectivity, underpinned by autoethnography, in audiovisual nonfiction storytelling as a tool for empowering media creators in the Global South to challenge Western-centric views and decolonize storytelling. Amid a predominantly Western-centric media production and theorizing, this research identifies a gap in understanding how Global South media makers can effectively employ reflective subjectivity to address power dynamics and encourage cultural sensitivity. The primary objective is to identify innovative strategies and best practices that can facilitate the incorporation of these methods into their work through filmic forms that have been termed as, for instance, essay film, autobiographical documentary, or first-person documentary. Utilizing a comprehensive review of relevant literature and in-depth analysis of two case studies involving Global South filmmakers who have integrated reflective subjectivity and autoethnographic practices in storytelling forms the core of the methodology. The findings reveal a number of effective strategies for challenging dominant perspectives and promoting diversity in media representation. The study concludes with recommendations for future research and practices, emphasizing the value of reflective subjectivity as a catalyst for more inclusive and equitable media representation of and in the Global South.

Keywords: Audiovisual Nonfiction, Reflective Subjectivity, Autoethnography, Essay Film, Autobiographical Documentary, First-Person Documentary.

1 Introduction

This paper endorses the application of reflective subjectivity in audiovisual nonfiction storytelling as an empowerment tool for media practitioners from the Global South to counteract prevailing Western-centric portrayals, which “continue to represent the Global South in negative terms, as a place where poverty, corruption, disease and famine reign” as stated by Willems [1]. The focus on the “Global South” in this essay stems largely from the observation that, within the contexts of audiovisual storytelling and media theorizing, the “Global South” has historically been subaltern to its oppositional entity known as the “Global North” as mentioned by Shohat & Stam [2]; Willems [1]

and Traverso [3]. Regarding both terms, "Global South" and "Global North" are geopolitical concepts that have respectively replaced the notions of the "Third World" and the "First World" following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Cold War constellation had previously divided the world into the "First World," "Second World," and "Third World." Levander and Mignolo argues that the post-Soviet developments could be viewed from two distinct perspectives. On one hand, from the "Global North" viewpoint, the "Global South" represents a "location of underdevelopment and emerging nations that require the 'support' of the Global North" [4]. On the other hand, from its inhabitants' perspective, the "Global South" is a place "where new visions of the future are emerging and where the global political and decolonial society is at work" [4]. Although Willems [1] refers to the latter perspective as possessing "emancipatory potential," in cultural works, according to Shohat & Stam [2] the West remains an "arbiter of artistic and cinematic value", where "representatives of the cultural centers of the 'Global North' hold the key that opens the door to artists from the 'Global South'" and "those who possess the key to open doors can also choose to close them as nations, regions, and auteurs fall out of fashion" [2]. Simultaneously, in media and communications studies, the Global South lacks the agency to theorize itself since the "Global South continues to be theorized from the vantage point of the Global North" as stated by Willems [1]. Specifically, in cinema epistemology, "film theory as a whole is not just Eurocentric but is predominantly Anglo-Francophone in both its outlook and orientation" according to Dissanayake and Guneratne [5].

As the concept of subjectivity itself is intricately intertwined with narrative point of view, it will form the departure point of this investigation. Within the arena of audiovisual narrative construction, the selected narrative point of view is paramount, influencing not only the work's thematic and ideological trajectory but also its trajectory of representation. As a result, the decision to adopt a first, second, or third-person narrative point of view forms the structural bedrock for the semantic and emotional cadences resonating throughout the work.

The emphasis on "audiovisual nonfiction storytelling" in this paper is predicated upon three rationales. First, nonfiction, by its nature, bears a heightened obligation towards representation, given its intrinsic pledge of immediate reality portrayal. Secondly, this focus on audiovisual narratives resonates with postcolonial theorist Edward Said's observations on the "electronic, postmodern world," [6] wherein he discerned standardized representations perpetuating oriental stereotypes by media especially by film and television [6]. Third, the debate around narrative point of view itself is especially salient within audiovisual nonfiction narratives, typically embodied in broadcast journalism and documentary filmmaking. Although some of their modalities might blur their boundaries, both broadcast journalism and documentary conventionally subscribe to inherent norms delineating their ideological fabric. While broadcast journalism, emblematic of the journalistic paradigm, strives for objectivity often culminating in a second-person viewpoint, documentaries, especially the so-called "creative documentary", De Jong et.al., [7] projects operating under a strong experimental or auteurist lens, might eschew stringent objectivity. Herein lies the inclination towards subjectivity, positioning the first-person perspective as a befitting conduit for this subjective expression.

Cinema, as an artistic medium, lacks stringent directives on subjectivity portrayal. Moreover, consensus remains elusive among audiovisual scholars on the most fitting terminology for subjectively-charged films. Noteworthy terms that have emerged include specifics like "autobiographical documentary" by Lane [8]; Renov [9] and "essay film" by Rascaroli [10]; Corrigan [11]; Alter [12] or overarching labels such as "first-person documentaries" as mentioned by Lebow [13]. Notwithstanding, film history provides a rich tapestry of tools directors have utilized to foreground subjectivity, notably the first-person narrative point of view in voice-over narrations. Such cinematic endeavors are distinctive in their vocal articulation, emphasizing the integral role of "voice" in shaping the audience's understanding. Not merely confined to spoken dialogues or commentaries, "voice" in essence encapsulates the nuanced interplay of a film's myriad elements as mentioned by Nichols [14]. The author contends that this filmic voice is more discernible in works oriented towards subjectivity, especially when underscored by a dominant first-person narrative that enlarges possibilities for intimacy and dialogue.

At its elemental level, the "I" or "we" in narrations serve a descriptive purpose, elucidating rather than immersing audiences into the core essence of the filmmaker's voice. Restricting narratives to this descriptive domain risks relegating a piece to mere instructional territory, thereby sacrificing its expressive potential. To augment the profundity of a work, media practitioners coming from marginalized communities, which include Global South makers in the face of Western-centric media/media makers, would benefit from emphasizing reflective narrations, fostering audience introspection and steering them towards the work's inherent voice. Thus, reflective subjectivity stands as a potent ally for the cinematic voice in its public articulation.

With that in mind, reflective subjectivity might grapple with the overarching mandates of objective journalism, more so when juxtaposed against orientalist tendencies prevalent in Western media narratives. But its true potential is realized in spaces that amplify the voices of the subaltern as mentioned by Spivak [15]—those marginalized by the structured hegemonies of Western intellectual paradigms. In this milieu, reflective subjectivity can effectively facilitate the subaltern's dialogue with the wider audience.

It is not within the author's purview to present every suitable strategy for manifesting reflective subjectivity in audiovisual nonfiction works. However, this paper posits that the method of autoethnography offers a potent avenue to guide the creation of compelling narratives imbued with reflective subjectivity. Essentially, autoethnography represents a research and writing approach designed to methodically describe and analyze personal experiences with the intent of understanding cultural phenomena as mentioned by Ellis et.al. [16]. While the majority of the literature associates autoethnography with the realm of "writing culture," the author believes this method can be judiciously adapted for audiovisual nonfiction production, or what Bartleet [17] calls as "autoethnographic documentary." How this can—and has been—implemented will be discussed in this paper. Grounded on the aforementioned foundations, this article seeks to answer two pivotal questions:

Based on these principles, this article addresses two main questions:

1. How might Global South storytellers utilize the autoethnographic documentary approach to infuse their narratives with reflective subjectivity?
2. In what ways has reflective subjectivity been manifested among filmmakers identifying as Global South storytellers?

2 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, drawing from an extensive literature review, critical film analysis, and in-depth interviews to address the posed research questions. To elucidate the first research question, a comprehensive review of literature was conducted. This review aimed to explore and define key concepts related to autoethnography, autoethnographic documentary, first-person documentary, autobiographical film, and essay film. Understanding these concepts provides a foundational framework for evaluating potential methods that Global South media practitioners could use to embed reflective subjectivity in their audiovisual nonfiction productions.

In addressing the subsequent research question, the methodology combined critical film analysis with in-depth interviews of filmmakers. This dual approach enabled both a detailed examination and a broader contextual understanding of the films. By complementing film analysis with filmmaker insights, the study aims to offer a more comprehensive perspective, avoiding interpretations based solely on the film content.

3 Result

3.1 Subjectivity in Audiovisual Nonfiction

The situation in which media theorizing is dominated by Eurocentric views, as argued by the author in the introduction part of this essay, is reflected in the exploration of theoretical aspects of subjective nonfiction cinema for this research. While the author's review of literature and findings on the topic of subjectivity in audiovisual nonfiction acknowledges a concerted effort among scholars to conceptualize specific terminologies that aptly encapsulate films inherently linked to this theme, they predominantly stem from Eurocentric perspectives. However, the author believes that this does not preclude the opportunity to conceptualize subjectivity from a Global South perspective. This is because subjectivity is not an idea exclusive to the West; even if theoretical foundations regarding cinema emphasizing subjectivity originate from the West, any effort to theorize the theme from a Global South standpoint should be rooted in the spirit of critically reaccentuating and repurposing them for a Global South context. After all, as Argentinian director and theorist Octaviano Getino stated when he reviewed his original statements regarding Third Cinema: "the value of a theory is always dependent on the terrain in which the praxis is carried out", Getino in Chanan [18]. It is from this rationale that the ensuing discussion in this section will be developed by the author.

Certain terms on subjective nonfiction cinema are precise in nature, such as the autobiographical film, domestic ethnography, and essay film, while others like first-person documentaries possess a broader scope. Scholarly definitions are predicated on a set of foundational components, which I shall delineate in this discourse. First, there are autobiographical documentaries and the closely allied term domestic ethnography, which root subjectivity in the most intimate milieu: the home. An autobiographical documentary, as described by Katz [19], is a sub-genre oriented towards the self or familial ties, underpinned by unparalleled levels of trust and intimacy. Lane's [8] analytical foray into this sub-genre underscores its accessibility, highlighting that even those without celebrity status or significant resources have engaged in its creation.

Renov [9] introduced a term parallel in essence, termed "domestic ethnography," which underscores the chronicling of long-standing familial or personal connections, invariably yielding casual intimacy. However, the realm of non-fiction does not solely confine subjective explorations to the nexus between the self and family. For this, Rascaroli [10] uses the term "essay film": inherently subjective, yet not strictly autobiographical. Rascaroli [10] further postulates that these films, beyond their subjectivity, are characterized by their reflective capacity. The essay film, therefore, challenges traditional demarcations between fiction and nonfiction. Drawing upon Adorno's sentiments, as cited by Corrigan [11] the essayistic form is emblematic of experiential genres. The quintessential essay film is envisioned to foster dialogue, invariably between the narrator, posited as the enunciator, and the engaged viewer, or the embodied spectator. Elucidating this dynamic, Rascaroli [10] posits the enunciator as being self-situated within the narrative, directly engaging with the viewer, thereby eliciting a dialogic interaction.

Given the centrality of narration, a pertinent inquiry arises: what narrative modality enables the narrator to seamlessly transition into an enunciator, facilitating dialogic engagement with the spectator? Corrigan [11] contends that the essayistic voice is emblematic of a subjective trajectory, wherein authorial personas or auditory commentaries actively engage with visual and intellectual paradigms. In demarcating between "autobiographical documentary" and "domestic ethnography" — terms that largely emphasize filmic content over modalities of subjectivity conveyance — and the "essay film" which signifies the employment of essayistic methodologies for authorial expression, Ros et. al. [20] suggest the broader nomenclature of "first-person documentaries" to encapsulate films offering personal vantage points on tangible events. Drawing upon Lebow [13], these films span autobiographical renditions, self-portraits, and even broader community or event-based narratives, ever enriching the tapestry of reflective subjectivity in audiovisual nonfiction.

Within the milieu of Global South narrators as subaltern entities confronting Western-centric media paradigms, several salient points emerge from the aforementioned discourse. To inaugurate this exposition, the author delineates a specific case, subsequently probing potential methodologies for its articulation via the mediums of autobiographical documentary, domestic ethnography, or essay film. The case is a story that centers on an indigenous woman deeply rooted in her community's battle, who eventually leads resistance against corporate attempts to eradicate their indigenous forests and marine ecosystems. When the story's guardian is also its media creator, utilizing

mediums such as the autobiographical documentary, domestic ethnography, or essay film can mitigate complexities tied to subaltern representation. Conversely, when an external media producer handles the narrative, a preliminary agreement with the central figure becomes vital. This agreement might involve creating an audiovisual non-fiction work using one or a combination of the aforementioned subjective film genres. The collaboration may necessitate drafting a subjective script, where the narrative's central voice emerges from its protagonist. The media creator might need to temporarily forgo their authorial aspirations, granting narrative control to the story's primary custodian.

Given the choice between an autobiographical documentary, domestic ethnography, essay film, or a combination thereof, the question arises: what should be the preferred approach? Specifically, for the presented case, which perspective best serves an individual positioning themselves as a subaltern narrator against Western-centric narratives? The author proposes the use of autoethnography, which Buzard [21] argues as an introspective study and portrayal of a culture by its members. Situated at the intersection of autobiography and ethnography, Ellis et al. [16], stated that autoethnography is a notable contribution to social science representation. It provides a deep insight into personal experiences while juxtaposing broader societal, environmental, and cultural contexts as mentioned by Purwanto [22]. Validating this proposition, Purwanto [22] emphasizes autoethnographies as a voice for marginalized groups, especially when economic and sociocultural disparities mute them. Autoethnography's traditional tether to research cultures has broadened, as scholars like Ellis [23] and Bartleet [17] introduce the "artful autoethnography," blending personal subjectivity and cultural exploration artistically. Bartleet's notion of an "autoethnographic documentary" epitomizes an audiovisual narrative infused with the filmmaker's personal experiences and perspectives [17]. Further, cinema enhances the narrative clarity and strength of these stories beyond traditional methods according to Gertride as cited in Bartleet [17].

Following Anderson and Glass-Coffin [24], autoethnography rests on five pillars. Though conceptualized within a research framework, these pillars are crucial for Global South narrators. They include a clear self-presence, distinct reflexivity, a deep engagement that rejects traditional detachment, vulnerability fostering audience resonance, and the refusal of a definitive narrative. The complexities of autoethnography as a narrative method cannot be understated; as highlighted by Purwanto [22], four fundamental requirements are essential: engagement with shareable events, proficient written expression (the context of his argument is autoethnography as a written product), the ability to introspectively recall past memories, and the capacity to reshape these memories into new semantic structures. Furthermore, Winkler [25] poses several dilemmas pertinent to autoethnographic explorations: How does one deeply engage with personal narratives whilst maintaining an academic concentration on cultural studies? Is there a predilection for empirical data over subjective impressions? What are the collaborative potentials inherent in autoethnography? Does evocative autoethnography hold an epistemic advantage over its analytic counterpart? To what extent is narrative ownership claimed in textual representations? How do autoethnographers navigate the spectrum between self-centric indulgence and reflexive scholarly vulnerability?

Considering these complexities, narrators must reflect deeply on the appropriateness of this methodological approach. They must strive to build intrinsic trust while navigating the emotional and intellectual terrains of autoethnography. From an indigenous viewpoint, Whitinui [26] offers essential questions for practitioners to pinpoint their sociocultural positioning: What are the foundational elements of one's identity and origins? How does one's self-conception align with indigenous paradigms? What convictions anchor one's indigenous identity? Which stimuli, positive or negative, resonate with one's indigenous sensibilities? What ethical guidelines direct one's interactions with the broader milieu, especially in the context of indigenous identity? What principles or beliefs does one ardently defend as an indigenous individual, and to what lengths?

To avoid potential narrative gaps, narrators might also reflect on questions proposed by Whitinui [26] regarding narrative disclosure, intended audience, and personal narrative's impact. First, what constitutes a propitious juncture for narrative disclosure? Second, what narrative boundaries are self-imposed, both in terms of inclusion and exclusion? Third, who constitutes the intended audience for the narrative, and what drives this selection? Fourth, does personal narrative exposition function as a unifying or divisive force among its recipients? And fifth, how does the narrative's veracity resonate with its intended audience in relation to the narrator's self-conception? Embracing the challenges and introspections inherent to autoethnography, storytellers therefore must understand that emphasizing subjectivity requires a constant experimentation process and breaking established boundaries according to Sparkes in Whitinui [26].

4 Discussion

4.1 Reflective Subjectivity as Experienced in Works by Global South Nonfiction Filmmakers: Two Case Studies

Following an exploration of the potential pathways available to a media maker employing a reflective subjectivity approach, this article examines two films to illustrate how such narratives manifest in audiovisual non-fiction works. The focus is on Global South storytellers, especially when the narrative contexts and themes relate to marginalized subjects, taking into account the filmmakers' sociocultural backgrounds and motivations influencing their creative decisions. This approach is applied to improve on research on first-person filmmaking in the English-speaking world, which primarily focuses on filmic self-representation at the textual level, with limited exploration of how cultural and social understandings of self-influence aesthetic and ethical decisions in production according to Yu [27].

The first film under consideration is "Salmiyah", 2019 [28], directed by Indonesian filmmaker Harryaldi Kurniawan and produced by Wulan Putri. This 22-minute essay film investigates the history of female indentured labor in the Dutch colonialists' tobacco plantations in Deli, now part of Indonesia's North Sumatra province. It juxtaposes fragments of the colonial past with reflections on its present-day legacies. In

2020, “Salmiyah” received the Best Indonesian Short Documentary award at the Festival Film Dokumenter (FFD), recognized as Indonesia's most prominent non-fiction film festival and Southeast Asia's oldest. Additionally, the festival highlighted the film as one of the 22 most innovative Indonesian documentaries since its establishment in 2000. The synopsis of “Salmiyah” is as follows: “‘Salmiyah’ delves into fragments of memory, insights from historical figures, history enthusiasts, and viewers. The past always poses questions and cannot be fully reclaimed. Individuals attempt to craft their own histories. ‘Salmiyah’ strives to capture the intricate, inevitably biased, and distant complexities of history” (Kurniawan, personal communication, September 7, 2023). This film not only urges viewers to reflect on the situation of female laborers in the Deli tobacco plantations but also prompts them to critically analyze how historiography often depends on its authors. Structurally, the film incorporates minimalist black-and-white cinematography, a mesmerizing monotone soundscape, and an essayistic first-person commentary written by Putri, inviting viewers to reflect on enduring economic injustices and the lingering effects of historical power dynamics on today's laborers.

To assess the presence of reflective subjectivity in “Salmiyah,” the film's opening two sequences are investigated. That is because in short documentary formats, the challenge arguably often lies in engaging the audience immediately with clear perspectives, closeness, and the flurry of ideas that embody the main perspective; in this case is subjectivity. In “Salmiyah,” the female-voice narrator presents herself early in the film. “They come. They come. Ships dock at Belawan,” narrates Putri in Indonesian, referring to a seaport in Medan, now the capital of North Sumatra. The visuals display a building wall with two large openings evenly divided on the screen. The space is accentuated with the jerky movement of a female figure in the darkness behind the old wall, while the hypnotic monotone music plays repetitively (Fig. 1). Subjectivity becomes apparent when soon after, the narrator uses the word “we”: “In this warehouse, we met.” This statement hints at two things: the building shown on screen is a “warehouse”, and in that place, the enunciator met someone. Two questions, then, emerge from the author when watching the part: Who is it? Is it the figure pacing in the darkness?



Fig. 1. Salmiyah opening sequence (Source: screenshot from the film Salmiyah)

The two questions are not directly addressed by the film. Yet cues of reflective subjectivity from the film's first two sequences could perhaps shed some narrative lights. The visual representation of subjectivity shows up as the film then presents a close-up of a woman, half-bodied (Fig. 2). Her facial expression is tense, wearing white clothing. Is

she the one the enunciator mentioned as "wearing a uniform more resembling a nurse than a tobacco laborer"? The storyteller does not explicitly say, but she subsequently declares that people do not want to hear history "from her mouth," the mouth of a "coolie." To then prompt viewers to reflect on their positions—along with their morality and exposure to the historiography of slavery—the narrator says: "I don't need to change these words just so your humanity remains undisturbed." The strong reflective subjectivity is marked by two statements made by the narrator. First, at the 0:34 mark, the narrator says, "I imagine her great-grandmother as a woman in a sarong and kemben [wrap]; feeling tight, confused, yet full of hope while carrying a child." Subsequently, at the 0:42 mark, the narrator says, "Why did they come? Why did I come? What brought me here? Why trace the dusty ground blown by the wind?" This sequence concludes with a shot clearly showing female tobacco workers lying in a factory room: a space where capital movement resides, not typically where people rest (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. A close-up of a woman (Source: screenshot from the film *Salmiyah*)



Fig. 3. Female tobacco workers lying in a factory room (Source: screenshot from the film *Salmiyah*)

The woman shown in the close-up shot is in fact the film's titular character Salmiyah, one of the female laborers that Kurniawan and Putri encountered at the movie's production site in 2018. Kurniawan (personal communication, September 9, 2023) remembered that initially, he and Putri were not looking for a specific person to be the protagonist of the film, admitting that their meeting with Salmiyah was unplanned: "In the beginning, we believed that every 'worker' certainly has a narrative. Each narrative has its own power. We couldn't dismiss one or the other workers. What happened next was a negotiation between us, the filmmakers, and the female workers there. It was like, 'okay, for this film, just speak with Salmiyah.' The female workers there directed us to Salmiyah. We didn't try to figure out why Salmiyah became significant. We just trusted them."

According to Kurniawan (personal communication, September 9, 2023), the use of voice-over narration was based on the fact that "Salmiyah" is a film about female laborers but was made by a male director, and thus he "couldn't fully immerse himself." Kurniawan (personal communication, September 9, 2023) stated that this position made him refrain from intervening in the narrative written and read by Putri; if he did intervene, he felt he would create a new overlapping narrative. He (personal communication, September 9, 2023) added, "if delved deeper, this narrative is about Putri herself. Perhaps she is the next generation of Salmiyah, when drawn from the word 'worker' itself."

The part following the title – the second sequence – again showcases the woman's close-up face. Meanwhile, the narrator invites viewers to reflect on how entities like researchers and media extract stories from "coolies," yet the history that keeps being heard is "their [researchers' and media's] own words." Interestingly, the narrator even opens up space for viewers to speculate on the storyteller's position and integrity when admitting "I could be like that," referring to how external parties like researchers and journalists frame fragments of the past for their contemporary audience. Throughout this sequence, Kurniawan presents minimalist visuals showcasing spaces within the factory, devoid of human presence and only filled with a handful of production tools (Fig. 4, 5 and 6). To conclude this sequence, "Salmiyah" employs a narrative strategy aimed at captivating the audience's attention to continue watching the film, where the narrator says, "But let me be clear: this is not about her."



Fig. 4. Minimalist visuals of spaces within the factory (Source: screenshot from the film Salmiyah)



Fig. 5. Minimalist visuals of spaces within the factory (Source: screenshot from the film Salmiyah)



Fig. 6. Minimalist visuals of spaces within the factory (Source: screenshot from the film *Salmiyah*)

Before Kurniawan and Putri began the film production, they had not yet agreed on the narrative approach that would be used in the final product (Kurniawan, personal communication, September 9, 2023). "*Salmiyah*" eventually became a highly subjective film because both felt that subjectivity was of utmost importance. When asked why they chose a subjective approach, Kurniawan (personal communication, September 9, 2023) said, "I believe in subjectivity. What exists is an encounter between our current subjectivity and the subjectivity of past narratives. I'm not saying that objectivity doesn't exist, but what I can say is there's a collision among various subjectivities."

Putri's (personal communication, September 9, 2023) response is similar to Kurniawan's: "I believe that nothing is truly objective. What exists is the effort to try to be objective. But achieving objectivity is impossible. What exists are events that have already occurred, and efforts to narrate, deconstruct, or reconstruct those past events. But the event occurs only once. Its objectivity, its truth, is just the event that happened. When I hear its story or see it, whether it's right before my eyes or if I hear the narrative from someone else, I will then fully build my own perception, which will again be influenced by my background."

In adopting a subjective approach, the filmmaking team tried to reflect on some of their internal struggles, such as "are we also part of that colonial practice, in its newest version, perhaps?" and "are we framing through a colonial lens?" (Kurniawan personal communication, September 9, 2023). Based on these considerations, Kurniawan (personal communication, September 9, 2023) positions "*Salmiyah*" as self-criticism towards himself as a filmmaker and a reflection on long-standing audiovisual practices.

According to Kurniawan (personal communication, September 9, 2023), these practices have created a colonialist framing: "I am reminded of Jean Rouch's films, colonizing Africa through cinema. What emerged was an African narrative from a French perspective. That's what we've been seeing all this time. In the context of *Salmiyah*, the history of plantations in Deli was framed by colonialism. This lasted a long time in the land of Deli. We might be just the latest people who have come and tried to frame them... '*Salmiyah*' is essentially a film that exists in a space of doubt. Are we repeating the same incident? Or should we instead critique ourselves, questioning whether we are part of the process of colonizing them?"

Beyond what Kurniawan (personal communication, September 9, 2023) describes as "an encounter between our current subjectivity and the subjectivity of past narratives," "Salmiyah" also "negotiates the subjectivities" of both Kurniawan with his background as a filmmaker and Putri as an academically-trained historian. As Kurniawan (personal communication, September 9, 2023) expressed: "If it's said that the commentary belongs entirely to Putri, that's not entirely true. And if it's said that the visuals are entirely mine, that's also not accurate." As a form of negotiation, "Salmiyah" is positioned for what Putri (personal communication, September 9, 2023) refers to as "amplifying subaltern voices." Putri (personal communication, September 9, 2023) states: "There are multiple subalterns: me, Harry, Salmiyah. There are several layers, and I don't know which layer we belong to. What's clear is that we are not at the topmost layer."

The second film analyzed in this section is "Sailum: Song Of The Rustling Leaves" (2023). This film is co-produced and co-directed by the author and Felix K. Nesi [29], an award-winning Indonesian novelist from Timor, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) province. The film received an international premiere at the Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival (TIEFF), the oldest and longest-running festival of its kind in Asia, on October 7, 2023.

The film's synopsis reads: In the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic, a writer embarks on a deeply personal journey to heal a family wound, seeking answers in his Indonesian ancestral roots, where an indigenous agrarian culture centered on traditional palm wine merges with a centuries-old Catholic devotion within the world's largest Muslim-majority nation. With a blend of poignant personal narratives and arresting visuals, the film offers viewers a glimpse into a resilient and unique culture.

Initially, the author was approached by Project Multatuli, an independent Indonesian media focused on marginalized issues, to create a short documentary where indigenous communities in Indonesia present their traditional knowledge to the audience. The author then invited Nesi to collaborate on this film. The author's intent from the beginning was to create a film strong in reflective subjectivity, translating what Project Multatuli wanted in its film. Both the author and Nesi agreed to explore the production and cultural significance of *sopi*, a traditional alcohol brewed from the sap of lontar palm trees native to Timor. Nesi (personal communication, September 10, 2023) was interested to collaborate due to the "different approach" proposed by the author, noting: "At first, when Moses suggested making a film about *sopi*, I thought, 'Why not just make it on my own using a phone: 'Hey guys, today we're making *sopi*, climbing the tree.'" I was also quite reluctant, since several filmmakers had approached me before ... However, after discussions, they'd say they're going to produce a documentary in a style resembling what we used to watch in the past, on the Discovery Channel. That's their intention: I'd go there [to the lontar farm], explaining things. Regarding such offers, I thought, 'maybe later.' In that case, just using a phone and uploading to YouTube would suffice. But Moses proposed something different, and I thought, 'Alright then.' I liked it."

The pre-production phase kicked off in September 2022. Nesi focused on developing the plot, identifying potential sources for interviews, and scouting shooting locations. The author took on the responsibility of drawing up the budget, arranging the shooting

equipment, defining the visual direction, and maintaining a direct line of communication with Project Multatuli. Both agreed to adopt a flexible, organic approach to their film, deciding to prioritize the shooting process first and then figure out the finer details later. In mid-October 2022, the production stage commenced, lasting eight days. The setting was Insana, Felix's home region in North Central Timor regency, NTT. During this period, the duo concentrated on gathering footage, with the author behind the camera and Nesi coordinating with the local people. They deliberately avoided getting bogged down in debates over shot composition or script discussions.

To observe how reflective subjectivity is present in this film, the author will anatomize the first two sequences of the film, with the same rationale that underpinned the analysis of "Salmiyah." The film starts with Nesi narrating about the death of a palm wine tapper in the 1980s in the Timor hinterlands. He fell from a lontar tree while tapping. This series of events is followed by a story about the wife searching for her husband who did not return home that day. The wife eventually finds her husband's dying body under an old lontar tree. As the enunciator narrates, the film's visuals alternate between two different activities: a Timorese gong music performance accompanied by local ronggeng dancers (Fig. 7) and someone's journey to a location (Fig. 8). As the music performance concludes, it aligns with a shot showing that person—Nesi himself—arriving at a graveyard (Fig. 9). This sequence ends with the film's title display.



Fig. 7. A Timorese gong music performance accompanied by local ronggeng dancers (Source: screenshot from the film *Sailum: Song Of The Rustling Leaves*)



Fig. 8. Someone's journey to a location (Source: screenshot from the film *Sailum: Song Of The Rustling Leaves*)



Fig. 9. Nesi arriving at a graveyard (Source: screenshot from the film *Sailum: Song Of The Rustling Leaves*)

After the title, the enunciator then says he is Nesi (Fig. 10), and the man who died under the lontar tree was his grandfather (Fig. 11). Nesi then describes how he is part of the indigenous Atoin Meto community in Timor and how the lontar tree holds an essential position in their lives. The visuals show a series of activities performed by Nesi and three members of his family at the cemetery.



Fig. 10. The enunciator introduce himself as Nesi (Source: screenshot from the film *Sailum: Song Of The Rustling Leaves*)



Fig. 11. Nesi explaining the man who died under the lontar tree was his grandfather (Source: screenshot from the film *Sailum: Song Of The Rustling Leaves*)

The second sequence is crucial in positioning reflective subjectivity as the film's narrative perspective, as Nesi's voice-over narration emphasizes how the tragic story of her grandfather's death left a profound impact on him: "Grandfather's death was the first heartbreaking story that I heard in my life/ although since childhood I've heard many

tales of sorrow told as rainy season fables.// About the Atoin Meto people who were captured and enslaved.// About the Japanese soldiers who forced my people to do hard labor without eating.// About Mother witnessing the massacre of communists in front of the church/ their throats slit after holy mass.// Or the great famine in Timor, after Indonesia invaded East Timor.// A famine that made my father and half of his generation eat tamarind seeds as their staple food.// And other tales of sorrow/ including the death of Grandfather beneath the lontar tree.// Although only recounted a few times by Grandma, the story of Grandfather's death feels so close.// It keeps returning to me."

According to Nesi (personal communication, September 10, 2023), writing the narrative script was an emotional journey through his childhood memories, replete with both joy and fear. Framing his family's history as a part of the Atoin Meto through their dietary habits, especially their consumption of *sopi*, proved to be a satisfying experience: "I've always wanted to discuss this matter. I'm from Timor, moved to Malang, and spent some time in Yogyakarta; one of the culture shocks in my mind was about drinks. In Timor, when we drink, we feel that the beverage brings us closer to our ancestors. And it's not just any drink, but high-quality *sopi*. When we drink pure *sopi*, we do so with gratitude and prayer, pouring it to the ground so we can drink with the ancestors. But when I arrived in Java and spoke about drinking, my college friends seemed to look at me with disgust. They thought I was sinful and mischievous. It took quite a while for me to grasp what they thought of drinking."

The author, on the other hand, adopted a visual aesthetic that aimed at creating an intimate feel for this personal documentary: a balance of static and close-up shots, the use of natural lighting, a color palette that was somber yet bold, all encapsulated within a 4:3 aspect ratio. This technique, previously employed in his other films, was further refined for "Sailum." Through the lens of reflective subjectivity, the author seeks to elevate storytelling and engage all of the audience's senses, immersing viewers in a profound cinematic experience. "Sailum" is a testament to the synergy between reflective subjectivity and the art of filmmaking, unraveling the intricate layers of social narratives while offering a critical examination of society's dynamics and internal contradictions.

At the core of "Sailum" lies Nesi, a central figure whose reflective subjectivity permeates the film's narrative fabric. His words, crafted with precision and depth, transcend the realm of fantasy. They are rooted in multigenerational memory, forged through the crucible of suffering and woven with threads of nostalgia. Through Nesi's lens, viewers are invited to explore the essence of self as the nucleus of social stories, prompting introspection and empathy. Yet, reflective subjectivity extends beyond the spoken word. It finds another expression through the author's camera, informed by his own background as part of the Batak ethnic group—a distinct Indonesian indigenous community that shares resonances with Nesi's Atoin Meto heritage. Their shared agrarian traditions, the coexistence of church and ancient rituals, and a traditional drinking culture form the backdrop of their intertwined narratives.

5 Conclusion

In addressing the two primary research questions, several concepts emerge that describe films with pronounced subjective elements. These concepts encompass the "autobiographical documentary," "domestic ethnography," "essay film," "first-person documentary," and "autoethnographic documentary." Notably, the "autoethnographic documentary" is identified as the most comprehensive framework for Global South narrators seeking to counter Western-centric narratives. This recognition, however, does not diminish the relevance of other filmic concepts for Global South storytellers. For example, the film "Salmiyah" illustrates the potential of the "essay film" as a medium to convey reflective subjectivity and express subaltern viewpoints within audiovisual non-fiction. Conversely, "Sailum: Song of The Rustling Leaves" primarily adopts the indigenious autoethnographic documentary approach but also incorporates significant elements of both the "autobiographical documentary" and "domestic ethnography."

These examples underscore the notion that the incorporation of reflective subjectivity in filmic narratives is versatile, not restricted to strict classifications. Given the expansive creative latitude, a Global South storyteller may embrace one or various methods, ensuring alignment with the narrative direction they, or their community, seek to communicate through the prism of reflective subjectivity. Subsequent research and media workshop initiatives can delve into how Global South storytellers might be trained to optimize their abilities in producing compelling audiovisual non-fiction infused with reflective subjectivity. This could include the exploration of storytelling capabilities in text, photo and video – three things that form the basic structure of audiovisual nonfiction narrative. Moreover, a comparative study of objective-leaning narratives and subjective-leaning narratives on the same topic might generate new findings and ideas that can help us evaluate if subjective narratives are potent allies of the subaltern.

References

1. Willems, W.: Beyond Normative Dewesternization: Examining Media Culture from the Vantage Point of the Global South. *The Global South*, 8(1), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.8.1.7> (2014)
2. Shohat, E., & Stam, R.: *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media*. Routledge (2014)
3. Traverso, A.: "Heading South, Screening the South." *Critical Arts*, 29 (5), 537–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2015.1125086> (2015)
4. Levander, C., Mignolo, W.: Introduction: The Global South and World Dis/Order. *The Global South*, 5(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.5.1.1> (2011)
5. Dissanayake, W., Guneratne, A. (Eds.): *Rethinking Third Cinema*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203634257> (2003)
6. Said, E. W.: *Orientalism*. Penguin Books (2003)
7. de Jong, W., Knudsen, E., Rothwell, J.: *Creative Documentary: Theory and Practice*. Routledge (2012)

8. Lane, J.: *The Autobiographical Documentary in America*. The University of Wisconsin Press (2002)
9. Renov, M.: *The Subject of the Documentary*. University of Minnesota Press (2004)
10. Rascaroli, L.: *The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments*. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 49(2), 24–47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41552525> (2008)
11. Corrigan, T.: *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*. Oxford University Press (2011)
12. Alter, N.: *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction*. Columbia University Press (2017)
13. Lebow, A.: *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*. Columbia University Press (2012)
14. Nichols, B.: *The Voice of Documentary*. In J. Kahana (Ed.), *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism* (pp. 639-651). Oxford University Press (1983)
15. Spivak, G. S.: *Can The Subaltern Speak?* In R. C. Morris (Ed.), *Can The Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Columbia University Press (2010)
16. Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., Bochner, A., P.: *Autoethnography: An Overview*. *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 36(4 (138)), 273–290. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23032294> (2011)
17. Bartleet, B.: *Artful and Embodied Methods, Modes of Inquiry, and Forms of Representation*. In S. H. Jones, E. T. Adams, C. Ellis (Eds.), *Handbook of Autoethnography* (pp. 443-464). Routledge (2013)
18. Chanan, M.: *The changing geography of Third Cinema*, *Screen*, 38 (4), 372–388, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/38.4.372> (1997)
19. Katz, J. S., Katz, J. M.: *Ethics and the Perception of Ethics in Autobiographical Film*. In L. Gross, J. S. Katz & J. Ruby (Eds.), *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photographs, Film, and Television* (pp. 119-134). Oxford University Press (1988)
20. Ros, V., O’Connell, J. M. J., Kiss, M., van Noortwijk, A.: *Toward a Cognitive Definition of First-Person Documentary*. In C. Brylla & M. Kramer (Eds.), *Cognitive Theory and Documentary Film* (pp. 232-242). Palgrave Macmillan (2018)
21. Buzard, J.: *On Auto-Ethnographic Authority*. *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 16(1), 61-91. <http://doi.org/10.1353/yale.2003.0002> (2003)
22. Purwanto, S.A.: *Otoetnografi: Mempelajari Kasus Pribadi Peneliti*. *Jurnal Antropologi Indonesia*, 32(3), (175-200). <https://doi.org/10.7454/ai.v32i3.2119> (2011)
23. Ellis, C.: *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. AltaMira Press (2004)
24. Anderson, L., Glass-Coffin, B.: *I Learn by Going: Autoethnographic Modes of Inquiry*. In S. H. Jones, E. T. Adams, C. Ellis (Eds.), *Handbook of Autoethnography* (pp. 57-83). Routledge (2013)
25. Winkler, I.: *Doing Autoethnography: Facing Challenges, Taking Choices, Accepting Responsibilities*. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 24(4), 236–247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417728956> (2018)
26. Whitinui, P.: *Indigenous Autoethnography: Exploring, Engaging, and Experiencing “Self” as a Native Method of Inquiry*. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 43(4), 456–487. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241613508148> (2014)
27. Yu, K. T.: *My self on camera: First person documentary practice in an individualising China*. Edinburgh U.P (2020)
28. Kurniawan, H.: *Salmiyah [Film]*. Perempuan Berkabar. (2019)
29. Nesi, F. K., Ompusunggu, M. P.: *Sailum: Song Of The Rustling Leaves [Film]*. Project Multatuli & Atmakanta Studio of Innovative Documentary (2023)

30. Álvarez, I. V.: *Documenting Cityscapes: Urban Change in Contemporary Non-Fiction Film*. Columbia University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/al-va17452.13> (2015)
31. Cuevas, E.: Home Movies as Personal Archives in Autobiographical Documentaries. *Studies in Documentary Film*, 7(1), 17–29. https://doi.org/10.1386/sdf.7.1.17_1 (2013)
32. de Fren, A.: From the Essay film to the Video Essay: Between the Critical and the Popular. In C. Milliken & S. F. Anderson (Eds.), *Reclaiming Popular Documentary* (pp. 157–178). Indiana University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv21hrhxk.15> (2021)
33. Kishore, S.: Re-framing documentary's victims: Documentary and collective victimhood at Indian media collective Chalchitra Abhiyan. *Studies in Documentary Film*, 17(1), 14-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2021.1887989> (2023)
34. Koutsourakis, A.: *Rethinking Brechtian Film Theory and Cinema*. Edinburgh University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv7n08d7.13> (2018)
35. Rascaroli, L.: *How the Essay Film Thinks*. Oxford University Press (2017)
36. Rondot, S. R.: Against a Single Story: Diverse Trans* Narratives in Autobiographical Documentary Film. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 34(1), 89-110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2019.1542826> (2019)
37. Rosas, V., Dittus, R.: The autobiographical documentary: archive and montage to represent the self. *Studies in Documentary Film*, 15(3), 203-219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2020.1815123> (2020)
38. Vassilieva, J.: Montage Reloaded: From Russian Avant-Garde to the Audiovisual Essay. In J. Vassilieva & D. Williams (Eds.), *Beyond the Essay Film: Subjectivity, Textuality and Technology* (pp. 165–188). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12pntxp.12> (2020)

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

