

# Argumentative essay: autobiographical film vs. autobiographical prose

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



Autobiographical film, like prose, is filled with the memories of the major events in one's life. In prose, authors give detailed descriptions of their past, while in film directors are able to employ visuals and the use of song and voice-over to illustrate someone else's life or his or her own. Autobiographies are supposed to portray one's life truthfully and accurately; however, most contain stretched truths and over-dramatized events or emotions. In the film medium there is more opportunity for fiction than in prose. Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* and Agn s Varda's *The Beaches of Agnes* are two differing documentaries that explore this idea. Throughout these two documentaries the directors make use of visuals and sound effects to elicit an emotional reaction from the viewers. The use of these effects allows the audience to better understand how the director remembers a certain event and how it affects them. One of the frequently used elements in documentaries is re-enactment. While this can be helpful in portraying an event, if you don't have real footage it allows for over dramatization and interpretation from the actor playing the role. The actor can listen to how the director wants it to be however they could never fully portray the event truthfully because they were not present for the actual event. This allows for major discrepancies in the retelling of one's past. In a review of *Tarnation* Michael Bronski discusses how " the extent of horrific psychic and medical destruction here is overwhelming (if not based on fact, *Tarnation* would play like a second rate John Waters film)". The reality of the film reminds audiences of the fragility of life and how quickly things can change. Bronski goes on to discuss how the facts of *Tarnation* really give the film power, emphasizing the idea that truth can evoke just as powerful a reaction as a

manipulated re-enactment. Using re-enactments in autobiographical film can force the audience to wonder about the level of truth in a scene. Has the scene been manipulated because it was more entertaining than the actual event or did the actor allow his or her own interpretation of the event to seep through and create an entirely new scene? Caouette filmed the majority of his life; therefore, the use of re-enactment was unnecessary. This almost constant day to day filming really helped to capture the essence of Jonathan's life and how he viewed everything that was happening. Though Caouette filmed almost every day, the film wasn't presented in raw form. Tarnation was edited down and pieced together. Throughout the film there were moments where editing was more obvious than others. Specifically the scene where Jonathan is on the phone with someone from the hospital. He is checking on his mother's condition after a Lithium overdose. In between the scenes of that phone conversation there is a clip of him vomiting. The audience later learns that this is because he is severely ill as a result of the stress. When this scene is shown, the sounds of him vomiting are heard but visually it looks as though he is simply coughing into the toilet. This leads the viewer to believe that perhaps this was placed there for dramatic effect. Another example would be the way the entire first scene is presented. It is clear the phone conversation has been cut and spliced. One scene is of Jonathan completely crumbling emotionally from the news of his mother's health, it lasts only for a second and then in the following scene he's completely collected and calm. It is evident that it is being presented to evoke a specific reaction from the audience rather than presenting it truthfully as it actually happened. Fiction can also find its way into

autobiographic film in that people behave differently when in front of a camera. They might see it necessary to "put on a show" rather than be themselves because of their discomfort with being documented. In many scenes when Jonathan is filming Renee she becomes very excited and begins to behave in a way that makes her look as if she is acting for the camera instead of just being herself. Another example of altered behavior because of the presence of the camera would be when Jonathan confronts his grandfather Adolph about his decision for Renee to undergo shock therapy. Adolph becomes very defensive and begins to close himself off because of the camera. He says to Jonathan "Take that away, take that away, I don't want to be photographed by him." People begin to worry more about the way they come across once they realize that they are being closely watched and documented. In Agnes Varda's *The Beaches of Agnes*, Varda uses quite a few re-enactments to illustrate scenes from her childhood. Haden Guest discusses "Beaches" in "Emotion Picture". She focuses mostly on her style as she recreated the memorable moments of her past. Guest writes, "The re-creation of childhood memories in evocatively restaged family photographs to the more abstract recreation of Varda and her crew assembling a fragile, open-air gallery of mirrors on a gusty beach." Audiences either find these recreations of past events helpful in gaining a better understanding of Varda's life or somewhat dishonest and overly staged. Again, re-enactments sort of lose the truth and allow the director to manipulate the audience into feeling one way about whatever it is they are presenting. Varda also chose to include footage of her and the crew working on the film, however its left up to the audience to decide whether this is a

moment of authenticity or yet another staged manipulation for entertainment sake. Throughout Agnes Varda's film she has many imaginative scenes. There are scenes of her staring blankly into the camera and walking backwards through places she once lived. Though this is in the film to illustrate that she is going backwards in time to tell her story it takes away from the portrayal of her story. Its included in the film for an artistic purpose rather than for one of truth and accuracy. In one scene her friend Chris Marker appears in the image of a cat and his voice is distorted to sound like a robot of sorts in a staged conversation with Varda. This scene, among many others, seems very whimsical and far from what actually took place in her past. Aside from fictitious imaginative scenes, *The Beaches of Agnes* strays from the autobiographical film genre, in that when Varda explores her past she ends up becoming more interested in something that she discovers on this journey that has nothing to do with her story. When she returns to her childhood home she becomes fascinated with the elderly doctor who now owns it rather than focusing on the life she lived there. In his review on "*Beaches*", Haden Guest writes "...the film frequently wanders away from its purported subject in order to learn more about the various people encountered along the way." It's as if she is making two movies, one about her past and the other about the people she met on the journey to making the film, but attempting to put them all into one. It seems the goal of *The Beaches of Agnes* is not to serve as a confessional narrative but an exploration into her past with a focus on the people she encountered rather than on herself. In film it is very easy for fiction to slip in and take control for entertainment value, whereas in prose there is a lesser opportunity. Both

Jonathan Caouette and Agnes Varda's styles of filming allow for fiction, whether it be through editing, reenactment or other elements of film. Each of these directors classify their films in the autobiographical genre which means their films should present their lives truthfully and accurately. However, in both films it is clear that each director has manipulated footage or used reenactments to present their lives in a different way. Neither film is one hundred percent truthful. These films should not contain over dramatizations or stretched truths. When tackling the genre of autobiographical film it is important to portray oneself and one's story in an honest light. Word Count: 1360 Works Cited 1. The Beaches of Agnes. Dir. Agnes Varda. Perf. Agnes Varda. Les Films Du Losange, 2008. Film. 2. Bronski, Michael. "Tarnation." Rev. of Tarnation. Cineaste 2004. Print. 3. Guest, Haden. "Emotion Picture." Rev. of The Beaches of Agnes. Film Comment 2009. Print. 4. Tarnation. Dir. Jonathan Caouette. Wellspring Media, 2005. Film.