

# The Liminal Space Between Life and Death in Documentaries. Case Study: “You, Margaret” (2021)

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**Abstract:** *The concept of liminality is explained and developed by anthropologists and aims to give the reader a closer look on how rituals are conducted in small societies combining everything with something that is based on experience. This paper aims on addressing the issue of old age, the connection between the passage of time and the gradual degradation of man, but it also focuses on other problems that arise with aging and the transition from life to death. Theoretical approaches are used to explain the use of the observational style in documentary filming when real people’s experiences are followed and then transposed in an observational style into a documentary film. It uses as a case study on my personal observational documentary entitled “You, Margaret” (2021).*

**Key words:** *liminality; anthropology of aging; transition from life to death; death rituals; observational documentary.*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to address the issue of old age, the gradual degradation of man, but will also focus on other problems that arise with aging presented in a personal observational documentary. The concept of *liminality* is researched by anthropologists and it aims to give the reader a closer look on how rituals are conducted in small societies and how old people tend to react in a patterned way. The aim of this overview is to understand how the concept of *liminality* has been developed and how getting old is presented within certain theoretical studies and in my personal film. The first part of the paper will discuss the observational mode of documentaries whilst in the second part the theme referring to the *liminality* concept will be brought forward. In order to understand the observational style of documentary films, this research focuses on studies made by scholars within the field who have advanced essential concepts for this manner of cinematographic representation. The third part of this paper focuses on a case study which is meant to undergo a detailed presentation of the whole process of making my own observational documentary “*You, Margaret!*”. The project which was born years ago in



my head and fulfilled my desire to create an observational documentary about the most interesting people in my life, my grandparents, the ones who taught me how to love and to live every moment like there's no tomorrow and never be afraid of what's next. This story presents a piece of their life in which the viewer can observe the way some couples are living their life together. Even if one of them is "directing" every move of the other, their life is spiced up with sweet and sour moments. It is a true family story about a patriarchal old couple from rural Romania. All the hard work is made by Margaret while Eugen only comments and notes everything down in a Notebook. While there are arguments here and there, the story shows how this old couple lives in modern Romania, how a wife can be controlled by his husband without her even talking back to him. Things will change and one of them will pass away, not before asking me to film everything around the house. This film was made in the memory of my beloved grandparents, as a gift to the ones that knew them and will love to meet them in another form.

Documentary films are meant to deliver a message about the world in which we live rather than a world imagined by the filmmaker. "Every film is a documentary. Even the most whimsical of fictions gives evidence of the culture that produced it and reproduces the likenesses of the people who perform within it." (Nichols, 2001, 1) When it comes to an audio-visual product, no matter what it is, the documentary part of the film can be somehow recognized, even if it is not directly presented, by the culture which reproduced the story it can be seen what it is really meant to be delivered. Nichols explains how both fictional and nonfictional films come closer to the viewer's imagination through the narrative. With the help of these methods every documentary follows a guideline and has a strict recipe in which it comes to a categorisation and representation.

### **LIMINALITY – A PLACE OF TRANSITION**

The concept of *liminality*<sup>1</sup> (Larson, 2014) was first applied to psychology as the technical term for the perceptual threshold, the degree of stimulus intensity that would just be noticed as audible or visible or detectable in any sensory mode. But its contemporary usage comes from the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (1873–1957), a classic figure of French folklore and ethnology.

Seen as the "father" of anthropology, Van Gennep talks about death and rituals after death occurs, explaining every ritual post-death and every tradition that is kept by people around the dead person's family. Mentioned above and titled in many studies, Van Gennep treats death as something unusual and explains the concept of life transition in a very understandable way. The article *Liminality and Experience: Structuring transitory*

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<sup>1</sup> "Liminality is a term used to describe the psychological process of transitioning across boundaries and borders. The term *limen* comes from the Latin for threshold; it is literally the threshold separating one space from another".



*situations and transformative events* situates the concept of liminality within anthropology and sociology underlining the connections by showing how experience is a must in understanding the term. The term *liminality* was first used by Van Gennep; “yet, hardly considered as a »founding father« of modern anthropology” (Szakolczai, 2009, 141). The two central elements which are representative for this paper are transition and transformation. Liminality is a concept developed by anthropologists and its aim is to explain how rituals are conducted in small societies combining everything with something that is based on experience. It is also explained by Ian McHugh in his thesis titled *Liminal subjectivities in contemporary film and literature* and its aim is to explore how liminality manifests in film and literature, by giving some clear examples of films and literature which treat this concept. Liminality in film and literature is subjective.

“I perceive the liminal to be a key trope of destabilised subjectivity. The liminal occurs at the interface of systems of meaning – temporal, spatial, or theoretical. As the subject enters the threshold space, it is placed in a crosswind of tensions, frictions, and collisions. Centrifugal forces are exacerbated as a liminal agency brings about interruptions, destabilization, and displacements of subjectivity.” (McHugh, 2010, 4) Having a dual meaning, subjective liminality negotiates the liminal and it becomes a distinct space between the ambiguities of a subject and an object. It’s like having a text and the narrator and the protagonist have one single voice, apparently. “Entering liminality, however, cannot be reduced to postmodern irony, playfulness, and the celebration of blank »ambivalence«. A liminal situation should only be provoked if one has a proper »form« in hand to impose on the soul of those whose emotions are stimulated by being put on the »limit«. This is what happens in the case of a work of art, like a Shakespeare tragedy, a Chekhov play, a Puccini opera, a Dostoevsky novel, or a film by Truffaut or Tarkovsky.” (Szakolczai, 2009, 157) Feelings, emotions can easily be provoked with the help of commercials, violent scenes, and fake reality, even though the ones engaged in such productions do not possess measure and want to profit and make money out of it. Everything is done assuming that this does not generate any change of reality, it is only meant to satisfy the needs and desires. Experience cannot be reduced to the perception of pleasure or pain by a fixed subject. As the author emphasizes, form and liminality, just as the limit and the unlimited, produce together a formative experience and formation. This is meant to help us understand the nature of transformative events, it is a technical term for sociological analysis, something that happens in real life, for an individual, a group or an entire civilization. Suddenly questioning and even canceling previously taken-for-granted certainties, thus forcing them to reflect upon their experiences, even their entire life, potentially changing not only their conduct of life but their identity. The change depends on some factors, the strength and the extent of the change, the external reference points and the presence or absence of new models.

The term *liminality* makes us understand that major events transform the mode of being of the individuals involved. Making it clear by giving a simple example: “it is not the »I« that loves the »you«; rather, it is the »it«, the love itself that emerges in the »in-between« of two human beings, forming and transforming both, by creating a single



unit that cannot be separated without a tragedy; a kind of »death«.” (Szakolczai, 2009, 158) The focus is shifted now on social and political theory, away from fixed subjects like acting or choosing, by minimizing the pleasure or the pain which is the only reason why we live as human beings on this earth. When pushing someone onto the limit, by forcing an event, structures are not taken for granted, and a model to imitate is needed, under these conditions every human being can be influenced to act in a different way for what’s best for them and objectivity is no longer possible, this means someone is misled rather than led, furthermore, their identity is altered. Other examples of liminality can be found in the same study, which help in understanding this term much easier. Liminality was ignored in modern society, social politics and in everyday life too.

One can start by referring to the general downplaying of rituals, identified as a characteristic of the modern world by Mary Douglas (1996). From the perspective of rationalist theories, rituals are mere ceremonies, irrational survivals of the past, not fulfilling any «useful» «function».

Szakolczai, 2009, 162

From this perspective, manifesting and masking the power relation involves the experience of participation which has a transformative potential. For example, in the modern world death was hidden. Van Gennep thinks that in marriage, as a rite of passage, it’s not a rational conviction that people live together and it’s all romantic. The divorce rate was increased in modern society and the costs were big enough. The romantic conviction is that true love does not need any ceremonies “a conviction that ignores deep human wisdom about the significance of transformative rituals. The modern world can certainly be proud of its intellectual and technological achievements; however, this does not mean that it can pretend to re-discover the wheel at the level of human relations. The result is a drastic and tragic weakening of the very fabric of society – a genuine trickster revolution erupting at the heart of sociability.” (Van Gennep, 2019, 137) Liminality is explained in the study of Arpad Szakolczai primarily and confronted with the other two opinions. The essential parts were explained, which helped me link this theoretical part to the practical part, the case study in which I show this theme in visual examples and scenes. The way my two characters evolve and the way they talk about marriage and death. The liminality concept is the most important tool that is at once innovative and based on the most important historical and anthropological tradition of mankind.

### **CASE STUDY: “*You, Margaret*” (2021)**

#### **Context**

A true family story about a patriarchal old couple from rural Romania. All the hard work is done by Margaret while Eugen only comments. While there are arguments here and there, the story shows how this old couple lives in modern Romania, how a wife



can be ordered about by his husband without her talking back to him. Things will change and one of them will pass away, not before asking me to film everything around the house.

### **Logline**

*“tu, Margit”* (original title) presents the true face of rural relationships. A fascinating family story taking place in rural Romania about Eugen and Margaret, two grandparents who live an archaic lifestyle and face the problem of sickness and death.

### **Synopsis**

The life of Margaret and Eugen is presented in a 35-minute observational documentary, in which the two main characters are living their daily life based on teasing each other. Eugen is the director of this 58-year marriage in which he accounts for every move her wife makes. He comments about her manicure, he puts her in a difficult situation when he asks about the pension, and she doesn't know how much she has to receive.

Fixing a simple hole isn't one of Eugen's skills, who asks Margaret to come fix it, while he shouts at her and starts directing her moves. Eugen's great skills is noting in his small notebook what everyone does on his property, something which is found funny by all the family members. Margaret is the only one who goes to church and believes in God, Eugen criticizes the institution and thinks that everything concerning the church is made up, he also says that the church is full of superstition. Even if he is sick and he has his days numbered he is still teasing Margaret saying that their marriage is a lie. All the family members are willing to help him, but it is too late. He passes away with regrets, leaving his house empty and many problems unsolved.

### **Cinematic approach**

The film has an observational cinematic approach combined with participatory interventions in the second part of the long documentary. I believe that this aesthetic approach is suitable for the audience to understand the atmosphere of the family through the presence of the director, who is filming them and has a close relation with the old ones. In this way, the participatory camera from the second part stays close to the characters and will give the viewer an inside view of their life.

### **Target audience**

The film is targeted at an audience of all ages, from working-class people to documentary lovers and old people from all over the world. Moreover, the documentary can appeal to anyone who has a particular curiosity about old people and their lifestyle in rural Romania. I believe it is important for the audience to see this film in order to un-



derstand that life is unpredictable, that someone can marry and still not love the one next to him and be blinded by some false promises which were made years ago.

### **Character description**

Our main character is the couple formed from Margit (the wife) and Eugen (the husband). They've been married for 58 years, are retired and live in a small village (Șmig) near Mediaș, Sibiu, in the heart of Transylvania. Their financial situation is a good one, they are living in the center of the village in the oldest house in the village. I always see that place as a small mansion. The entrance is big and the backyard is full of green grass and trees all around. When I was small I was fascinated by the large number of animals around the house and used to spend my summer vacations out there, sometimes sleeping in the hay with all the cats. The male character, Eugen is the head of the house and directs his wife's every move. He keeps strong evidence about the people who are born and die, about the ones who come and help them with agriculture. He is making homemade wine and sells it to the locals who help him. He loves being in the center of attention and is always playing a bossy role, he is the one who actually asked me to make a film about him, about his work, about what he had achieved during his life, he is very proud of his children and about his small mansion.

The other main character is Margit, who married Eugen when she was only 17 years old. The story of her life is simple, even if she has not worked a day after getting married, she raised four children and took care of the whole household. She was an unpaid and unappreciated housewife. Every chore was done only by her, she raised four children, animals, took care of the house and worked very much to keep things going. In the meantime, Eugen was working as a chief builder in Mediaș, when we used to take small trips to the city he was explaining every single time that he had built those stairs, he and his team had been constructing that hospital and so on. While Margit was never allowed to leave the yard, she had always been given an exact amount of money to buy bread or dishwasher lotion. As far as I remember she had always brought every penny back and my grandfather wrote down the outgoings and the incomes in his yearly notebook. Many years ago, I went to them and suggested making a film out of this weird relationship, their love and hate relationship which wasn't familiar to me. My grandfather acted like a set manager and helped a lot in filming the documentary, giving indications to the other characters mentioning that his nephew's homework had to be done properly.

### **Access**

The main access to my characters represents a very tight relation to my family members, my grandparents and the ones helping around, their goddaughter, the people around the village and some relatives. Everyone is fine with me filming them. One major problem with access is the fact that it is very hard to get into their personal lives. Until now, only my grandparents allowed me to film them and when I started filming



the second part, some relatives were not really satisfied that I documented the reality as an observer and also participated in some actions. The real reason why my grandfather allowed me to film him in that poor condition was because my aunt from Germany wasn't there, because of the pandemic and she wanted to know how her father was feeling. My other aunt was a bit skeptical about this film and we had a bit of a discussion and I managed to film because of my grandfather's wish to help his nephew. I continued filming and my family members became more comfortable and granted me access to more layers of their existence.

### **Research**

The research was already concluded in December 2018, but I had had this topic in mind since entering the film school in Cluj Napoca. It was 2017 when I first tried to film something with the two main characters, I provoked them to talk about spirituality and religion. I told Eugen to talk about religion and about the fact that someone will pass away. At that moment I was really thinking about how life would be without one of them, they seem to complete each other, how is the transition for one another. I was shocked to hear that Eugen feared death and Margit was ok with that, saying that life is gifted by God and he has the right to take it away. On the other hand, Eugen feared death because all his material possessions seemed to be thrown away and everything would have collapsed without him in the house. This is the reason why I researched the themes which right now are explored in my own film.

### **CONCLUSION**

After doing this research, I understood that an observational documentary is crafted not only by a camera in the technical sense, recording reality from an exterior point of view, but also by the subjective mind of the director, who selects what to capture from reality. A documentary that uses this mode of representation must give the viewer an authentic and factual feel. Besides, this research helped me understand that the observational film can be manipulated during editing in order to change the initial meaning of the raw observed images and to add multiple layers to an event. This manipulation grants the documentarist the power of changing the audience's perception, due to social, political, or personal considerations. The subject from the first part was also linked to the concepts of liminality which was explained and detailed. The term liminality is used to give us a closer look on how rituals are conducted in small societies based on the own experience of the one involved. In this whole process of aging and transition, people have to be aware of this fact and react in patterned ways. The aim of this overview is to understand how observational documentary has been developed and how getting old is presented within certain theoretical studies. Aging is presented from an anthropological point of view. Liminality is a concept developed by anthropologists and its aim is to explain how rituals are conducted in small societies combining everything with some-



thing that is based on experience. I admit that, if I had had a more clearly defined concept from the early beginning, it would have been much easier to edit this film. Lastly, with this observational documentary I assumed a neutral position, but I have to admit that I manipulated the footage in the editing room in order to generate new ideas. This film was made in the memory of my beloved grandfather who loved being a character in his marriage, he always wanted to be in the center of attention and with the help of this observational documentary I made it possible, I showed the aging period of the old couple and the transition what was faced by my whole family one year ago when the film was building itself. And when it comes to life transition in documentaries, it's all about the process and the way everything is captured in one moment. It describes how a person reacts when someone dies and the fact that it is all a patterned response to death. In the traditional and pre-modern society death is seen in a religious way; religion forms the basis in understanding death. The authority figure is the priest and the language of understanding is that of organized religion. The life transition and aging can be seen as a long process; these transitions are seen and researched by anthropologists and sociologists and presented with the help of observational documentaries.

Aging is a natural process in which people tend to change and adopt a different point of view when it comes to death which is seen as an inevitable process. Yet, it is easy to capture reality, but it does not have the same impact as being involved.

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