CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARY / MA ELECTIVE

HOLDING ON

Filming Before Loss

Anticipatory grief, diaspora, and the urge to document in contemporary documentary

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does the urge to document change when filmmaking becomes a response to anticipatory grief, diasporic distance and the fear of forgetting?

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01

I had the camera before I had the word for the fear

Long before I made “every time, for everything,” I was already filming my life. As a child and teenager, I made vlogs, collected clips, saved conversations, and kept small pieces of days that probably did not look important to anybody else. At the time, I would not have called this an artistic practice. It was closer to an instinct. Filming gave me a way to make something stay still long enough for me to look at it again.

That instinct followed me into film school. In my first bachelor year, Publieke Ruimte with Flo Flamme changed the way I understood documentary. I had entered school thinking that filmmaking mostly meant constructing something in advance: writing a story, directing it, and trying to make the final result match the idea in my head. Documentary asked for something else. It asked me to go into reality without knowing what it would give back. That uncertainty scared me, but it also felt strangely familiar. I had already been using cameras that way for years.

My first-year installation, “Dakloze Herinneringen (Homeless Memories),” along with an early short film about my father, already contained questions I am still working with now. I often find myself coming back to themes of family, memory, distance, and the feeling of belonging to more than one place without ever feeling fully rooted in any of them. My tutor and teacher at the time, Nelson Polfliet, once told me that my father was a subject I could make a thousand films about. I took that to heart, not because I wanted to remake the same film but because I understood that a relationship changes every time you look at it.

Even when I step back from my father as a subject, I notice that the same approach keeps coming up. I usually start from personal experiences rather than a topic I have already planned out. The personal event isn't automatically a film; it's simply the starting point that prompts me to look deeper. This distinction really matters to me. I want to make sure that my work doesn't turn into an excuse to put my private life on screen. The real work begins when I ask myself what a personal experience can reveal once it’s shaped through images, sound, and the passage of time.

The essay-film texts mostly gave a name to something that was already happening in my own work. I never consciously decided to make “every time, for everything” as an essay film, but looking back, it makes sense that it took on that form. My own questions, memories, and relationship with my father are part of the film, and a lot of its meaning only

became clear to me later, especially during editing. Rascaroli (2017) helped me understand the essay film as a form that leaves space for questions rather than closing them down, while Arthur’s (2017) description of a self-searching authorial presence also felt close to the way I work. The theory did not change the film, but it gave me a better way to understand why searching and reflection had already become part of it.

This is the question I want to explore in this paper: Why do I feel such a strong urge to document before I completely understand what I am capturing? Personally, this urge relates to memory and to fear. Especially with my father, filming gradually became linked to the fear of losing him. This research helped me realize that this isn't just a personal reason for creating images. It influences where I position the camera, what I choose to record, what I notice during editing, and how I make sense of absence even while the person is still present.

02

Filming someone who is still here

When I arrived in Hong Kong to make “every time, for everything,” I thought I was making a portrait of my father's life split between Hong Kong and Belgium. I wanted to understand the walled village where he stayed, his routines, and how he moved between two very different places. Part of that was also a way into my own background. I grew up in Belgium, but Hong Kong has always been part of my life through family, language, food, stories, and long periods of absence. I thought that by observing my father closely, I might understand something about both of us.

Then he got sick and was hospitalized. The plan became irrelevant very quickly. For a while, the camera almost disappeared because I was helping care for him and dealing with practical things I hadn't expected. When I started filming again, I was not doing it from the same position. I was filming out of fear.

I had been diagnosed with anticipatory grief when I was younger, but back then, I mostly saw it as a term rather than something I could truly recognize in myself. It wasn't until years later, when my father's health seemed more fragile, that it all became painfully real. Looking back, I realize that might have been one of the reasons I felt such a strong urge to return to Hong Kong. I didn't consciously tell myself I was running out of time with him, but I was acting as if I were. A systematic review by Singer et al. (2022) describes anticipatory grief as a kind of future-focused grief, where someone is still present but the fear of losing them has already begun to shape the relationship. That explanation helped me understand something I only saw clearly afterward: a part of me was already preparing for

his absence, even while he was still there. Filming became part of that process. I wasn't just recording my father in those moments; I was also holding onto things I already feared I might lose.

That changed what felt worth filming. I became interested in things that would have looked almost useless in a conventional portrait: the way he sat in a room, the sound of him moving around the house, his facial expressions, the objects he kept near him, his hands doing small tasks. I didn't film important events because I knew they would become meaningful scenes. I feared forgetting the ordinary parts.



Still from *every time, for everything*.

That strange overlap between presence and future absence came up again in hauntology. Stoffel Debuysere's (2025) lecture approached haunting as a disturbance of ordinary time, where absence can remain active in the present and past; the present and future do not sit neatly apart. I do not want to force a theory of ghosts onto my father's illness. What stayed with me was the temporal problem. Anticipatory grief had made a future absence enter the present before the loss had happened. I was filming someone who was there while already being haunted by the possibility that one day he would not be.

This also adds a new layer to the idea that recording is just about preservation. I wasn't just preserving a fixed version of my father. He was changing, our relationship was evolving, and I was changing while filming. The camera could capture those changes, but it could not stop them. In fact, recording made me more aware that time keeps moving forward.

03

Returning is not the same as coming home

My fear of losing my father is difficult to separate from distance. For eight years, there had already been a large gap between us. He also belongs to a part of my identity that I have never experienced as simple. I am Chinese and Belgian, and Hong Kong can feel extremely familiar and slightly foreign within the same afternoon. I know gestures, tastes and family habits that belong there, but I also arrive with the distance of someone who grew up somewhere else.

Mariner of the Mountains came closest to this feeling for me. Karim Aïnouz travels to Algeria, his father's homeland, for the first time, with his camera and memories of his mother. The film is personal and observational rather than trying to offer a detached historical account. What stayed with me is that the journey does not resolve the question of origin. Reaching a place connected to his father opens up more memories, associations, and questions rather than giving him a final answer.

I recognized that in my own return to Hong Kong. I did not arrive and suddenly become more Chinese or finally understand my father because I had entered his village. Returning can even make distance more visible. You notice what you know without thinking and what you have to ask about. You recognize a family habit but do not understand a reference. You feel at home in a room and foreign to the conversation happening inside it.

This uncertainty is part of what keeps pulling me toward documentary filmmaking. It allows contradictions to remain visible. I don’t need to decide whether Hong Kong is my home before filming; the camera moves with me through that uncertainty. This also explains why personal and cultural themes often intersect in my work. When I film my father cooking, repairing things, or walking through the village greeting friends and family, I capture someone who has always been part of my life, even though there is still a lot about him I do not know. He is my father, and I am his daughter, and love exists between us even when we still don't fully understand each other. At the same time, I am looking at customs that connect me to a history and culture I inherited from a distance.



Still from *every time, for everything*.

In *We Are Inside*, family life and history are almost impossible to separate. Farah Kassem goes back to Tripoli to film her father amid Lebanon's ongoing political and economic challenges. I was struck by how little separation there is between the political situation and everyday family life. History enters through rooms, conversations, disagreements, and the relationship between two people. The film doesn’t have to portray the father as a symbol of Lebanon for the political situation to be relevant; it’s already woven into the family’s everyday world.

Thinking about diaspora changed how I look at this part of my work. I don't want my father to just represent 'Chinese culture,' nor do I want Hong Kong to be a quick visual cue for identity. Instead, I find it more meaningful to explore how migration and cultural distance influence relationships from within. My father and I might not always show affection in the same way, especially since we haven't lived in the same places or experienced the same versions of Chinese and Western culture. I don't want those differences to explain everything, but they are present in the film.

04

The archive does not stop time

I used to think about archives in a fairly simple way: if I recorded enough, there would be something to look back on later. The archive seemed like a way to keep memory from disappearing. Once we started looking at archives in the course, that simple idea started to feel a lot more complicated.

24 City rejects the idea of memory as a perfect record. Jia Zhangke blends real interviews with fictional characters, allowing testimony, performance, and historical memory to coexist. The lecture on the film questioned who has the authority to define history and highlighted memory as a way the absent past appears in the present. This distinction is significant to me because my own archive isn't a neutral storage system either. I choose what to film, when to stop recording, and what ultimately makes it into the edit.

Preservation can be complex, especially in Fossati's (2018) writing on film archives. She explores how choices in preservation, restoration, and presentation change with technology. While my own archive differs from an institutional one, the core challenge of selection still matters to me. Simply keeping an image grants it a future that countless unrecorded moments lack.

I often find myself thinking about this because I've always been a collector of old vlogs, phone clips, various cameras, voice notes, photographs, and fragments that weren't meant to be part of a finished film. These pieces can resurface years later and bring back things I had almost forgotten. Technology lets us store so much of our lives, yet storage doesn't always equal memory. Sometimes I come across a video of something I barely recall, while other times I vividly remember a moment but have no image to go with it. That gap between recording and remembering is what interests me.

Another reason this matters to my practice is that I grew up with digital cameras, phones, and the internet; recording can feel almost effortless. I can film a minute without overthinking whether it deserves to exist. This naturally shapes the archive before I even start editing. The challenge isn't just capturing an image anymore; it's choosing what deserves attention afterward. Having so much material makes editing more important, and more emotional, for me. I am deciding which moments of a person will continue to be shared and which will stay in private memory.

I also value that limitation. I don't actually wish for every memory to become footage. Some moments are better left a little unstable, able to change through retelling or even fade away. For me, the camera isn't about defeating forgetting. It gives me something concrete to return to while memory keeps changing around it.

This became clear when I edited "every time, for everything." I'd revisit footage and notice things I hadn't understood while I was there. A glance, a pause, or a simple gesture could suddenly feel so much more meaningful months later. The image on the screen stayed the same, but my connection to it changed over time. That's why I don't see my footage as just proof of exactly what happened. Instead, it keeps evolving as I grow and change.

05

When care becomes the film

Sofie Benoot's *Apple Cider Vinegar* (2024) affected me differently from the other films in the course because Sofie also mentored “every time, for everything.” I had already spent months talking with her about uncertainty, structure, and observation before re-watching her film in this academic setting. This made the connection feel even more personal. I saw the patience in her work as something she also encouraged in mine: not to rush into clear answers, to embrace the unfamiliar in encounters, and to trust that meaning will emerge when we pay close attention.

My original film plan had been based on observation, but illness made that distance impossible. I had to accept that I was not only a filmmaker in the room. I was a daughter, and a caregiver. At first I thought that meant the documentary had been compromised. Later I understood that the change in our relationship was not an interruption of the film. It was the film.

Two scenes explain this better than theory does. In one, my father is ill himself but quietly applies eczema cream to my arm. In another, after we argue, he notices the soles of my shoes are coming loose and repairs them without saying much. Neither scene felt important as it happened. No confession and no dramatic reconciliation. During editing, however, I kept returning to both.

In my family, affection isn’t often shown through the right sentence at the right time. Instead, care is all about being practical and straightforward. Someone might prepare a meal, fix something broken, remind you to stay warm, buy and cut up some fruit, or take care of a physical issue—all in a way that feels natural and unforced. My dad and I might argue, misunderstand each other, or go long periods without really talking things out, but he still shows he cares in those simple, everyday ways. He worries about me, fixes things when they break, brings food, comments on what I’m doing, and sometimes it’s as if the argument never even happened. Now, I see that this is how he expresses his love; it was probably how he was shown love, too, growing up.

That's why the scene of him repairing my shoes after an argument became such a meaningful moment for me. He doesn't apologize in the kind of way I might expect from a conventional film scene. Instead, he just fixes the shoes. The same goes for when he cares for my eczema. Even during filming, I already felt how much these small gestures meant to me and wanted to hold onto them. The editing didn’t suddenly show me they were acts of love; it helped me notice how often this language of care showed up in the

footage, especially during times when communication between us was tougher. I can't say exactly what my father was thinking with each gesture, but together, they helped me understand what our relationship really looks like.



Still from *every time, for everything*.

Looking back at *We Are Inside* and *Apple Cider Vinegar*, what stays with me is how relationships reveal themselves over time. In both films, intimacy builds through time rather than arriving in one dramatic scene. That patience is something I recognize in the way I want to work.

It also made me think differently about ethics. Consent and representation are crucial, but I believe that connection isn't just about recording; it's about the ongoing understanding and trust built over time. In my case, that bond existed long before I picked up a camera. It was rooted in my relationship with my father. I didn’t go to Hong Kong knowing he would become ill, nor did I approach him as just a subject for my film. He’s always been my dad, and the camera has been a part of our lives for years; he even gave me my first camera. Our familiarity made filming feel natural. At the same time, that closeness brings a deeper sense of responsibility. The film might come to an end, but our relationship continues, and every decision I make about his image is still part of our ongoing story.

06

What the edit knows later

Post-production is where the essay-film theory became less abstract for me. Rascaroli’s (2017) idea of the essay as a personal line of reasoning does not only describe voice-over or a visible filmmaker. It also describes the edit as a place where thinking becomes form. Arthur (2017) also writes about how the author's voice can move through images, speech, music, montage, and camera rather than being confined to one channel. That feels close to how I work.

I film quite intuitively. I often don't know why I am drawn to a gesture or why I keep the camera running a few seconds longer. The edit is where I have to become more precise. It is where I start asking why an image stayed with me and what happens when I place it next to another one. In many ways, the film begins twice for me: once in reality and again in post-production.

That was especially true with “every time, for everything” because the material came from different cameras, different periods, and a production that had changed direction halfway through. Instead of hiding that mess, I started to see the fragmented material as a natural part of the film's story. My relationship with my father was also complex and layered. The same went for my connection with Hong Kong. The form didn’t need to pretend to be anything different.

Voice-over also became useful because it let me speak from a later position without pretending I knew those things while filming. The person recording an image and the person looking at it months later are not exactly the same. I like that distance. It lets a film contain uncertainty instead of correcting the past into a cleaner version of itself.

What stays with me isn't just the simple idea that documentary is subjective - that feels almost too obvious to be an interesting conclusion anymore. What interests me more is how that subjectivity can move through time. A film can hold the person I was when I first recorded something, the person I became while editing it, and the viewer who brings their own experience to it. Rascaroli’s (2017) concept of the essay film as a dialogue resonates with me here: the film doesn't need to answer everything to be considered complete.

07

Holding on without freezing time

The urge to document was already part of my practice before I had a theory for it or the term anticipatory grief. The course did not create that impulse, but it made it easier to see what it was doing to my films.

I started “every time, for everything,” hoping that spending time with my father and observing his life would help me know him better. His illness changed the circumstances completely, but in the end, it brought me closer to that original intention. I spent more time with him than I had expected to, saw him in situations I had never seen before and became involved in his everyday life in a way that observation alone probably would not have allowed. I started filming again because I was worried about losing him, but also because I wanted something for myself: a record of that time I could always return to. The film became both a way of getting to know him differently and a memory I could keep looking back on later.



Still from *every time, for everything*.

My Chinese-Belgian background is a part of who I am, but it doesn't define everything about me. I often find myself returning to Hong Kong because it's linked to my father, yet it also brings up so many questions about inheritance and identity that I can't fully answer from afar. The returns in *Mariner of the Mountains* and *We Are Inside* stay with me, because they show that belonging isn't always about reaching a destination. Sometimes, the journey itself is what matters most.

I also no longer believe that the purpose of documenting is to save everything. Technology lets me keep more images than I could ever meaningfully remember, and there is something slightly absurd about trying to build an archive against death. A recording can outlast a person, but it cannot replace them. I think I knew that all along. The fear simply made me film anyway.

I started by asking why I keep picking up a camera. The answer is still partly fear: fear that time will pass faster than I can understand it. I don't see filmmaking as a way to freeze life. I am more interested in how the camera makes me stay with a moment longer, and how editing lets me return to it later from a different position.

Maybe holding on is not the opposite of letting go. For me, documentary sits somewhere between the two.

08

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