

## ***The Fire of Love and The Fire Within.*** **Uses and Interpretations of Archives in Documentary Film**

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### **Abstract:**

For a documentarist, observing the present is constantly accompanied by a glance backward or, rather, an inward gaze. When working with archive material, the filmmakers dig like storytelling paleontologists, exploring and connecting the material without always having full knowledge of what they are making, letting the images lead the way before working backwards to find a narrative. Soon, their subjective perspective comes into play, leading toward the future storytelling.

There are multiple types of truth: emotional truths that shape our inner selves and historical truths that mold our external reality. With each piece of archival material, new interpretations of reality emerge, and new authors are born. In this article, I will analyze the different perspectives of two documentary filmmakers regarding the same archival material. Thus, the filmmaker's subjective viewpoint becomes essential, what can be found in any work.

As a result of reinterpretation, the film archive is infinite. History is written and rewritten using all fragments of memory, regardless of their medium of representation.

**Keywords:** documentary film, archive, interpretation, truth, memory, authorial voice

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## Introduction

In the context of a documentary film workshop, where I introduced students to working with archival materials, I proposed an exercise to highlight the flexibility in interpreting archives, which depends on the authorial voice of the person utilizing the materials. We organized the students into four working teams and provided them with a selection of 60 minutes of materials from various sources. Using the same archive, they were tasked with creating short audio-visual exercises, each with distinct themes. As a result, they produced a love film, a horror film, a poetic film and a propaganda film. Despite using the same material, the different interpretive frameworks made the use of identical images feel distinct from one exercise to another. Factors such as subject matter, overall selection, pacing, tone, soundtrack and dialogue contributed to each material becoming a unique audiovisual experience.



Still from *Fire of Love*, d. Sara Dosa, 2022

Based on this analysis, I decided to focus on two notable documentary films by two directors who had access to the same archival material. Each director created a unique feature-length movie, with the central figures being the authors of these archives: the volcanologist couple Katia and Maurice Krafft.

The two documentaries provide a fascinating study of how two filmmakers can access the same archive, utilize some of the same cinematic tools, such as voice-over narration, and produce two vastly different films. It perfectly showcases the author's voice. However, this intriguing pair of documentaries did not captivate the critics and received little discussion as a duo.

In January 2022, Sara Dosa's documentary *Fire of Love* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in the USA. Later, in June of the same year, Werner Herzog's *The Fire Within - Requiem for Katia and Maurice Krafft* debuted at the Sheffield DocFest in the UK. By 2023, *Fire of Love* received an Oscar nomination for Best Documentary Feature, significantly boosting its visibility compared to Herzog's work. This is one of the reasons why I believe both documentaries deserve an analysis, as they attempt to decipher the explorations of the two directors in the archives of the two scientists. Despite using the same archival sources and featuring the same main characters, the directors' focuses differ, revealing both a feminine and a masculine perspective.

### **The archive – always in interpretation**

When we view images, whether they are photos or videos, we initially adopt the perspective of the person who captured them (whether professional or amateur). As we process what we see, our own perspective emerges. Consequently, two subjective interpretations of the same content are juxtaposed.

The documentaries being discussed here delve into and compose the achievements of the volcanologist couple Katia and Maurice Krafft, weaving together the incredible footage they filmed over decades around the world to reconstruct their artistic accomplishments and reveal their passions – for each other, for volcanoes, but especially for the filmmaking process as a medium for discovering reality.

The construction of the two films reveals their respective stakes. Herzog's film is a personal exploration of something beyond our understanding, while Dosa's film is designed to reach a broad audience, as evidenced by its Oscar nomination. This does not diminish its value, but it does define its distribution goal. Herzog's film is much more personal, and his perspective as an author working with the material of other authors transcends in every frame.

*Fire of Love*, released first, focuses more on the relationship between the Kraffts than their volcanic research. Filmmaker Sara Dosa emphasizes the couple's marriage and how their mutual passion for volcanoes united them. From a feminine perspective, with Miranda July as the voice-over narrator, the film highlights Katia and her archive, portraying her as cautious person, in contrast to the adventurous Maurice, who is willing to take any risk.

Werner Herzog's *The Fire Within* is a documentary that explores human emotions and experiences, capturing the essence of the human condition through a unique perspective. Although it contains few personal details, Herzog's presence is integral to the film. Through his documentaries, Herzog endeavors to reveal hidden truths and confront the unknown. He aims to challenge conventional perceptions and explore the sublime in both nature and human existence (Ames, 2009, p. 49).

In his films, Herzog searches the mythical cosmos by often blending science and mythology. His unique contribution to the documentary film tradition is characterized by his desire to capture the abstract and present a deeper truth that transcends mere observation. This search for an "ecstatic truth" is evident, where encounters with nature evoke strong emotions and reflections on the human condition. During a retrospective at Minnesota's Walker Art Center in 1999, Herzog "one of the most outspoken of the poetic documentarians" (Rogers, 2015, p. 5) – issued his Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Filmmaking. The fifth point of the declaration encapsulates his understanding of authenticity and truth.

"There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as a poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylisation." (Herzog, 1999)

*The Fire Within*, focuses on celebrating their films rather than their personal lives, examining their work as artists from their amateur beginnings. – "Their films look like home movies shot by tourists. Everything is unspectacular" – and then commends their compositions and their transition to more "humanistic" themes. Herzog views them as "artists who transport us, the viewers, into the realm of strange beauty."

Herzog's interest in volcanoes started years ago, and he has explored them in several of his films. *The Fire Within* is clearly inspired by his 2016 documentary *Into the Inferno*, where he also incorporates footage captured by the Krafft couple. In this documentary, alongside volcanologist Clive Oppenheimer, the filmmaker

examines active volcanoes globally, focusing on their impact on nearby communities.

In *Katia and Maurice*, Herzog sees more than just explorers – he sees gifted storytellers. Unlike Dosa’s film, which focuses on the personalities and romantic relationship between the two adventurers and the landscapes they explore, Herzog’s film is a tribute to the couple, honoring their work not only as explorers but especially as storytellers. In *The Fire Within*, it is clear that Herzog’s perspective is twofold: he deeply analyzes the couple’s view of life – nature, people, and animals. During a Q&A session, Herzog said, “It’s a very strange correspondence between footage and people that aren’t alive anymore... you all of the sudden take the responsibility on your shoulders.”

Herzog’s approach is more minimalist compared to Dosa’s. He uses very little new material, relying mainly on the Kraffts’ archive, music, and his own voice, which he uses sparingly. His film features long sequences with images of the Kraffts, sometimes evoking the past and other times the future end of the world, accompanied by his music selections. He delves deeply into their footage, trying to understand it profoundly. He employs a kind of textual analysis, reading in layers and sublayers. I believe the couple’s images are powerful enough that they do not require Dosa’s effort to bring the film closer to the audience through stylistic diversity.

In contrast, Dosa’s *Fire of Love* employs creative collage effects, combining various materials from the Krafft family’s archive, TV clips, and other sources. It includes 19th-century book illustrations, animations and a voice-over narration. Dosa’s film also provides a more detailed portrayal of Katia and Maurice’s personal lives. Through the voice-over narrator reading from her journal, Katia mentions she preferred walking behind Maurice on unstable ground because he was heavier and she would rather follow him to death than be left behind, with this being the only moment of vulnerability shown in Dosa’s portrayal of Katia.

In 1991, during the eruption of Mount Unzen on Kyushu Island in Japan, Maurice and Katia Krafft lost their lives. Engulfed by their object of fascination, the couple met their end in the place they cherished most – amidst nature. Herzog’s documentary reflects on their demise and the concept of an “imminent end,” but primarily focuses on their mythical image. Both films showcase the profound dedication the two had for their work, but Herzog’s interest in this type of lifelong commitment is also evident in his documentary *Grizzly Man*, where

environmentalist and bear enthusiast Timothy Treadwell and his girlfriend were killed by a grizzly bear in Alaska, a place where Timothy felt at home. Herzog himself has faced danger for his films. He filmed active volcanoes in North Korea and was once shot during a BBC interview. After relocating the crew to a safer spot, Herzog insisted on continuing the interview, saying, "It's not a significant bullet." Both literally and metaphorically, Herzog seeks the divine spark in his films and the subjects he examines: the ultimate encounter between humans and nature, captured on camera. Herzog acknowledges the perilous situations the Kraffts put themselves in, but this is no surprise, as Herzog's work often centered on characters like the Kraffts – outsiders, pioneers, and his own life mirrored this passion. His films reveal an obsession with landscapes and individuals who transform into explorers: the awe of discovering the unknown and its impact.

The concept of the sublime emerged from catastrophic landscapes. When English authors John Dennis and Joseph Addison traversed the European Alps in the 17th century, they reported experiencing a blend of terror and wonder at the irregular and bizarre terrains that evoked thoughts of mortality and peril. Their descriptions of the powerless observer in the face of the scenery laid the groundwork for the idea of the sublime.

Tracing their cinematic evolution, Herzog notes that the Krafft couple's recordings transition from capturing the mundane – preserves, bread, Italian sausages – to nearly ethereal visuals. The pair relinquishes their scientific roles and transforms into filmmakers. To illustrate this cinematic growth, Herzog employs a scene where Maurice removes the mask obscuring his face: "Like out of a fog, Maurice real persona seems to emerge, the mask comes of. [...] A great filmmaker is born". Maurice handles the filming, while Katia manages the audio and takes pictures.

Herzog infuses the visuals with a lyrical significance that supports the concepts he aims to present. Much like Sara Dosa in *Fire of Love*, the footage we observe becomes a reflection of the creator's perspective. Since the creators differ, the visuals are imbued with distinct meanings. While Dosa's film narrates a terrestrial love story, Herzog's film is a tribute to divine creation – ultimate love. One of the most powerful sequences in *The Fire Within* begins with Herzog's voice narrating, "There is a fascination about the beauty of volcanoes, but they have caused terrible disasters." A volcano erupts, and the result of this eruption, filmed by the Krafft couple, unfolds on the screen.

Herzog emphasizes the distress of humans and animals captured in the Krafft couple's footage following volcanic eruptions. Reflecting on the darkened sky after the eruption, Herzog contemplates: "We are watching a scenario of the future." [...] "Could this pollution happen without a volcano, just caused by human behaviour?", where day turns into night, and the dust and ash obstruct breathing. Herzog shares his thoughts even when his voice is not heard. The way he arranges the images and their duration often reveals more about his viewpoint than that of the Krafft couple. When we see children playing in ash dunes, we perceive their future with a melancholic yet accepting view of nature's power. Lava flows like blood through veins, in a creation process that signifies the force of life. Herzog tells us they were documenting "Creation in the making," but they didn't have time to edit. In Herzog's film, life and death coexist.



Still from *The Fire Within - Requiem for Katia and Maurice Krafft*,  
d. Werner Herzog, 2022

While Herzog delves into the creative work of the couple, Sara Dosa's enhanced archival images and animations solidify the mythical nature of volcanoes in the human imagination, and the equation between love and fire in her film suggests that love is also unclassifiable, as noted by Catherine Russell (2022, p. 47). The unpredictability of volcanoes mirrors the uniqueness of the Krafft couple's love adventure. Just as mythical love is as grand and powerful as the natural forces of hot lava flows, it is also suggested that each love relationship has its own distinct character and flow.

Following their demise, Herzog reveals that what remains is their footage – “some of it has a quality of dreams, like in a biblical apocalypse, stones are raining from the sky. [...] Plants, creatures and our hole planet, seems to be somewhere in otter space.” We observe this conclusion while listening to Giuseppe Verdi’s *Messa da Requiem*. In this finale, the last recorded images belong to the cameraman who accompanied them on this last journey. Despite the threat of death, he continues to film, frightened, trembling, retreating with the camera in hand. He keeps the camera rolling, as if realizing that the only time machine is the camera itself. As a final analysis, Herzog searches for the Krafft couple in these frames. Somewhere in the corner of a moving shot, he suggests, or rather hopes, that we catch a glimpse of them. “Let’s look at it again”. Herzog revisits the footage in slow motion and crops it. Dosa employs a similar technique in her film, at the beginning, when she attempts to pinpoint the moment of the future couple’s first encounter using visuals. While Herzog uses a single frame for examination, in *Fire of Love*, the narrator orchestrates a montage of scenes through cuts, split screens and image manipulations.

Herzog concludes his exploration of the relationship between humans and nature with the thought that “in their lives together they walked along a precipice. In their love they become one. This shot was made by Maurice walking with the camera. Katia must have held him, so he wouldn’t fall.”



Still from *The Fire Within - Requiem for Katia and Maurice Krafft*,  
d. Werner Herzog, 2022

At times, Herzog's voice-over narration can come across as almost clinical and impersonal, especially when compared to his earlier documentaries, as he shifts between analytical and reverential tones. Nevertheless, he takes pleasure in mocking the Krafft family's early cinematic experiments, pointing out instances where they exaggerated or staged events for the camera, and later commends them for this very trait.

Since the 18th century, starting with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, the concept of the sublime has emphasized the gap between human imagination and understanding. Herzog views the Krafft couple's work as more than just documentation; he sees it as moments of imagination and fantasy, similar to dreams. The Kraffts were true artists, and Herzog showcases their work in a multifaceted manner. We share in Herzog's sense of wonder and joy. The images, edited with a dreamlike rhythm and accompanied by an evocative soundtrack and Herzog's narration, are powerful enough to evoke these feelings. The film truly serves as a requiem, encompassing all the meanings of the term.

Sara Dosa focuses her ending on a shot she attributes to a journalist – an abandoned camera on a tripod, as described by the narrator's voice. The brave act of filming at the cost of one's life does not find its place in the conclusion of *Fire of Love*. While Herzog searches for the couple in the image, assuming that what we see is them ("Could that be the Krafts? The probability is high."), Dosa is certain that the same image shows the two, a yellow cloak and a red one, in a final visual testimony of the Krafft couple's existence. ("The last known shot of Katia and Maurice together.")

However, if we choose to view these frames from both films as raw material, we can conduct our own investigation.

## Conclusions

It is clear that the power of analysis and interpretation of archival material tends to be infinite, constantly enriched by the perspectives under which they find their place. The original authors of these materials relinquish their creation into the hands of other authors.

In his article *Constituting an Archive*, Stuart Hall notes that "It is impossible to describe an archive in its totality" (2021, p. 91), because "an archive may be

largely about ‘the past’ but it is always ‘re-read’ in the light of the present and the future.” The archive offers incomplete information and is in a continuous process of construction. It serves as a framework whose content always refers to what is left outside of it.

When working with archival material, filmmakers dig like archaeologists and investigate like storytelling paleontologists, exploring and connecting the materials, sometimes without having complete information about what they are doing or what they have found. Initially, they are guided by the images, and later they work on finding and articulating a story, which almost always is more about the author than the subject itself.

Stella Bruzzi, a researcher in film studies, writes that “documentary has always implicitly acknowledged that the ‘document’ at its heart is open to reassessment, reappropriation and even manipulation” (Bruzzi, 2006, p. 16). However, she argues, the openness to interpretation does not lead to “irretrievable the document’s original meaning, context or content.” Bruzzi thus suggests that, despite its interpretation, there is still a limit to the transformation of the document. Both *Fire of Love* and *The Fire Within - Requiem for Katia and Maurice Krafft* bring to the screen the surprising life of this couple, with many of its facets, the focus being personal, depending on the directors’ concerns.

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