

Twinning: Production Notes on *The Registry*
by Alex Tyson

In the Spring of 2019, I noticed a hummingbird searching for a branch to build a nest outside my window. Female *Calipete anna* hummingbirds are native to the Western Coastal region of North America. Roughly the diameter of a golf ball, their nests are built from foraged plant fibers, twigs and anthropogenic material like dryer machine lint and human hair. This particular nest was speckled with shards of blue house paint. Prior to the bird laying two eggs, identical in size, I set up a camera system with a 200mm lens on an incremental timer. She tended to her young for about three weeks, anxiously zipping back and forth between pips of orange blossom nectar. It rained. My neighbor suddenly died. The sun came back out—flashing her iridescent plumage—clipping the camera’s CMOS sensor. I eventually filled up some harddrives, which would later become principal footage for *The Registry*, a narrative fiction.



In *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987), a pair of identical twins named Dan and Don Stanton were cast as Armed Services radio station clerks in Hollywood’s interpretation of Saigon. It’s unclear if this was a deliberate nod to the fact that the Vietnam War initiated the largest ever medical study of biological twins conducted by the US government, encompassing 14,738 individuals, colloquially referred to as “The Registry.”¹ The Stanton twins were later enlisted by director James Cameron to play hospital security guards in *Terminator 2* (1991), though in more of a ‘stunt double’ capacity. One of them served as a host body to the shapeshifting T-1000 cop and impaled his own brother on-screen. I wonder to what degree the casting directors of these films may have considered the brothers to be a type of *living practical effect*, and if modern VFX acuity has nullified the demand and appeal for twins in movies altogether.

Offscreen, biological twins aren’t intrinsically scary. But, as evidenced by The Grady Twins in *The Shining* (1980), cinematic twinning can create unease, like a flash migraine. Seeing double is a sudden phase distortion in the brain. It’s as if your occipital lobe is suddenly aware that it *can look*, and it is looking at itself; like the first millisecond you catch yourself in a mirror. Have you ever dunked your head in a freshwater stream and then caught your warped reflection in the water, not immediately accepting it’s actually you? There’s a funny scene in Terrence Malick’s *Voyage of Time* (2016) depicting this exact thing—an early hominid gazing at

his face in a gushing river—perhaps illustrating humanity’s first shock of being (or was this Malick’s wink to the inception of cinema?). The twin trope in literature and movies might prevail because it triggers this deeply programmed existential horror of self-awareness. A bifurcation of the interior and exterior self. We feel this when the *Shining* twins deliver “Come play with us, Danny”, and when the doppelganger family from Jordan Peele’s *Us* (2019) arrives uninvited. It’s the shadow you can’t shake.



Increasingly, I feel that the documentary–industrial complex is casting a long shadow. Documentary images function like movie images, but they have other phantom properties with social implications that are hard to measure. I’ve been working (however precariously) as a cinematographer and editor in non-fiction media for over a decade, beginning during the most salient boom of the genre. Since 9/11, there’s been a massive shift in documentary viewership² and cultural cachet. Previously confined to classrooms and museum auditoriums, non-fiction films now get purchased for sums in the “middle seven figures” by tech companies.³ It’s unclear if this reflects a larger appetite for “real movies” or if the industry has gotten more efficient at cinematizing and commodifying the real. Either way, directors—and further up the ladder, marketing firms and distributors—ascibe value to doc stories not just as entertainment, but as agents that represent societal change.

In some instances, films have been able to catalyze political, environmental or even spiritual action. This is why the Obamas run a non-fiction production company and, inversely, why ad agencies make yogurt commercials that look like interludes from Oscar-winning documentaries. But while stories reflect society, they also performatively project the moral allegiances of their financiers, regardless of the politics they engage with behind the screen. For this reason, directors who avoid traditional storytelling (e.g. three act structures and transformational character arcs) or avoid singular stories altogether, find it impossible to prove to investors that their projects will be politically expedient down the line.⁴ Unwritten endings are unsafe investments.⁵ I often wonder: what happens to all the interesting film ideas that “get dialed back” or worse, go unmade because of this paradox? It’s my hope that this period of documentary saturation leads to a market that is less risk averse and willing to deprioritize narratives and human protagonists in favor of something conceptually alien.

The documentary “character” has also reached a new importance, as evidenced by the Critics Choice Documentary Awards recent invention of the category for the *Most Compelling Living Subject of a Documentary*.⁶ But what do on-screen documentary characters gain by participating in the industry, and what is their screen time worth? I’m interested in these valuations, which often begin at documentary pitching forums and industry meetings. The fictional meeting between a young Stanford adjunct and a budding true crime producer in *The Registry* was inspired by firsthand experience of both actors. As my friend and artist D.S. Chun improvisationally declares in the film:

“I love a good story, but [...] no matter how many dollars we put behind it, or how many degrees we put behind it, we would not be telling their story, we would be casting them to act in a story that we would write—and I don’t think you want to play that role.”

The character-driven storytelling mode often consigns people as subjects instead of active *filmmaking* participants. What if the industry placed their bets earlier in the process and gave them more agency? Or, what if we deprioritized anthropocentric storytelling altogether? Would this allow the genre to mutate into something more distinguishable from its narrative twin?

The Registry attempts to show the pressure points of the documentary-industrial complex and how they might engage with the military-industrial complex. To paraphrase Jairus Grove’s argument in his book *Savage Ecology*, war isn’t just an event culminating in destruction; it is an amorphous ecological process that is by definition, a creative force.⁷ War is a story multiplier. It writes chapters in the minds and bodies of veterans, on the shelves of stock footage archives and eBay, and in the strands of human DNA borne from counterinsurgency operations. *The Registry* points to the cosmology of a wartime “story”: one that never got made, or at least remains unedited for the time being.

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[Alex Tyson](#), 2022-02-24

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- ² McCready, Bo, 2022. *Tableau Public*. [Film Genre Popularity, 1910-2021](#). [Accessed 22 February 2022]
- ³ Among many examples, see Silver, Stephen, 2020. "['Boys State' directors talk about working with Apple and the future of movie theaters](#)". *AppleInsider*. [Accessed 22 February 2022] or Sun, Abby, 2022. "[Sundance 2022 Critic's Notebook: Fire of Love, Every Day in Kaimukī and Shorts](#)". *Filmmaker Magazine*. [Accessed 22 February 2022].
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- ⁶ Wikipedia. 2022. "[Critics' Choice Documentary Awards](#)". [Accessed 22 February 2022].
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