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The Living Script

Proposing an Adaptive Practice in Humaira Bilkis's Things I Could Never Tell My Mother (2022)

Abstract

This paper examines Bangladeshi filmmaker Humaira Bilkis's feature film, *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*, through genetic criticism and screenwriting theories to propose the concept of the living script: a dynamic narrative framework that evolves in response to real-time discoveries, emotional shifts, and ethical dilemmas. Bilkis's film exemplifies this process, weaving intergenerational dialogues and confessional sequences to negotiate complex cultural and inter-religious boundaries within Bangladeshi society.

By analysing early drafts, directorial notes, and an interview with the filmmaker, the study reveals how Bilkis's narrative adapts to the contingencies of production. This fluid approach embodies a self-reflexive negotiation between storytelling and cultural discourse, engages with core debates in documentary theory, and offers a symbolic dialogue from a Global South perspective. Ultimately, the concept of the living script provides an adaptive framework for understanding screenwriting as a site of negotiation between intention, collaboration, and reality, particularly in narrative films employing documentary aesthetics.

Keywords

Bangladeshi film, creative documentary, ethical dilemma, living script, transcultural transfer

I don't have aesthetic objectives. I have aesthetic means at my disposal, which are necessary for me to be able to say what I want to say about the things I see. And the thing I see is something outside of myself — always.
Paul Strand¹⁾

Screenwriting, as a discipline, has long been dominated by rigid forms and predetermined structures. Yet, in recent years, scholars and practitioners have begun to interrogate the very nature of the script as a static document, arguing instead for its potential as a dynamic, iterative entity.²⁾ In this paper, I propose the concept of the living script as a framework to understand how narrative filmmaking — especially within the creative documentary and docufiction genres — can function as an evolving dialogue between creative intention and the unpredictable flux of real life. In contrast to Merewether's notion of living documents³⁾, which emphasizes processual flexibility primarily in terms of structural and logistical adaptations, the living script foregrounds emotional shifts and ethical dilemmas as critical drivers of narrative transformation.

This study focuses on Humaira Bilki's *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*, a film that negotiates intergenerational, inter-religious, and cultural boundaries through its conversational and personal style and fluid narrative structure. Bilki's work emerges from a Bangladeshi context marked by both historical tensions and contemporary societal transformations. As such, her film offers a unique site for exploring how the script adapts during production — from early drafts and directorial notes to the final cut — responding not only to practical constraints but also to emotional revelations and ethical imperatives.

The objectives of this article are twofold. First, it seeks to elaborate the theoretical contours of the living script, demonstrating how emotional and ethical dimensions become embedded in the narrative-making process. Second, it aims to show how these dimensions facilitate a re-grounding of living scripts with the notion of documentary style like *cinéma vérité* or observational mode, the “*cine-eye*” philosophy and the ethical concerns of representations, authorial responsibility and subject-filmmaker relationship. In doing so, the paper contributes to a broader rethinking of screenwriting theories, one that privileges creative alchemy over deterministic structures.

The Static Screen, the Moving Image, and the Weaver

The cinematic practice of Humaira Bilki is centered on the nexus of history, politics, and personal experience. Her creative methodology is characterized by a researcher's intellectual rigor, an ethnographer's observational acuity, and a conversationalist's sensibility. With an academic qualification in mass communication and journalism from the Univer-

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- 1) Michael Renov, “Toward a Poetics of Documentary,” in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 12–36.
 - 2) Ian W. Macdonald, *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 22–23.
 - 3) Janet Merewether, “Shaping the Documentary Subject: Writing and Visualizing the Documentary and Media Art Script,” *Journal of Screenwriting* 6, no. 1 (2015), 89–113.

sity of Dhaka, Bilkis began her practical training through filmmaking and cinematography workshops during her undergraduate studies. This period coincided with the early 2000s, an era when digital filmmaking was not yet a prevalent option in a Least Developed Country (LDC) like Bangladesh. Consequently, Bilkis pursued a conventional trajectory to acquire experience in film production, undertaking roles on various projects. Of particular note is her engagement as an assistant producer for *A Journey of a Thousand Miles: Peacekeepers* (2015), a production by two-time Academy Award-winning documentary filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy. Subsequently, Bilkis graduated from the Creative Documentary program at the Sri Aurobindo Centre for Arts and Communication in New Delhi. This practice-based academic training enabled her to explore guerrilla filmmaking techniques, blending personal autoethnography with feminist textures and examining the complexity of human relationships through an observational approach. As she defines her approach to filmmaking:⁴⁾

I prefer the ethnographic “fly on the wall” approach. I start with a hypothesis in mind, but let my observations guide me towards what the final narrative is, trying to remain as objective as possible. I do all my own camera work, so I like working with a light hand-held camera. For *The Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*, it had to be more interactive, since it was a personal, partly autobiographical work, of course.

Bilkis’s work is self-reflexive. The film’s central conflict, as detailed in its press kit,⁵⁾ originates from a profound ideological schism within her family. The filmmaker’s mother, Khaleda Bilkis, formerly a passionate poet who cultivated her daughter’s appreciation for the arts, underwent a significant transformation following her Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca in 2002. Adopting a strictly religious lifestyle in accordance with Sharia law, she repudiated her previous cultural engagements and now insists her daughter abandon filmmaking, citing Islam’s prohibition of human representation. This divergence presents a fundamental paradox for Bilkis, as her chosen medium of expression has become the object of her mother’s condemnation. This situation engenders a central question that the film endeavors to address: How can the cinematic apparatus — an instrument of representation that has become a source of ideological conflict — be repurposed by the filmmaker as a potential medium for reconnection and understanding?

The film navigates this inquiry through a deeply personal narrative. Bilkis initially agrees to undertake the Hajj with her mother, perceiving the journey as an opportunity for reconciliation and as a moment to disclose her clandestine interfaith relationship with a Hindu partner in India. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic precludes the pilgrimage, compelling them to remain confined within the family home as her parents’ health deteriorates. It is within this period of enforced proximity that Bilkis directs the camera inward, grappling with the complexities of her maternal bond and seeking to identify the shared values that might still connect them across their profound divide. This shift

4) Sabrina Fatma Ahmad, “Q&A With Humaira Bilkis,” *MW*, March 29, 2023, accessed September 14, 2025, <https://mansworldbangladesh.com/2023/03/29/qa-with-humaira-bilkis/>.

5) “*Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*,” 2022, Humaira Bilkis’s Personal Archive, Dhaka: Bangladesh.

from a planned journey to an unforeseen confinement exemplifies the film's status as a living script: a narrative framework that evolves in response to the contingencies of production and real-time emotional discoveries. The filmmaker's initial intention — to explore societal shifts by examining her mother's life — was itself a response to a broader generational disconnect she observed among her peers. However, the pandemic necessitated a radical adaptation, transforming the project's methodology. By focusing the camera on her immediate domestic reality, Bilki's process embodies a self-reflexive negotiation between her original storytelling objectives and the unavoidable present. *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* thus becomes a necessary exemplar of the living script concept. The film's narrative is not merely executed from a static blueprint but is actively shaped by the evolving dialogue between filmmaker and subject, past and present, intention and reality. By engaging with themes of transformation, ideological conflict, and transgressive love, the film challenges the conventional moral boundaries of representing private life within Dhaka's contemporary filmmaking culture. It serves as a reference to a transformative practice where the screenplay itself becomes a site of negotiation, allowing for a resonant, autobiographical narrative to emerge from the complex and often unpredictable interplay of life and art.

The Living Script: An Argument for Flexibility, Discovery, and Affective Truth

Recent scholarship in documentary screenwriting has increasingly challenged the traditional dichotomy that posits the form as inherently unscripted. Theorists like Brian Winston⁶⁾ have dismantled the notion of the "script as an oxymoron," demonstrating how even observational cinema achieves narrative coherence through iterative scripting processes. His analysis of filmmakers like Frederick Wiseman reveals that films celebrated for their spontaneity are often undergirded by structured, albeit flexible, written frameworks. This line of inquiry has been expanded by others who conceptualize the script as a provisional tool. Jouko Aaltonen⁷⁾, for instance, frames the documentary script as a "hypothesis" that is continually revised in response to real-world unpredictability, while Janet Merewether⁸⁾ introduces the idea of "living documents" that adapt to on-set improvisations, participant agency, and ethical considerations.

While these perspectives valuably highlight the script's processual and logistical flexibility, they tend to stop short of fully exploring the affective and moral dimensions that underpin narrative evolution. The work of John Iwuh and Nicodemus Adai Patrick⁹⁾ on docufiction, which examines the delicate balance between fact and fiction, begins to touch on this by emphasizing the ethical imperative to signal embedded facts through narrative.

6) Brian Winston, "The Documentary Script as an Oxymoron?," *Journal of Screenwriting* 6, no. 3 (2015), 287–300.

7) Jouko Aaltonen, "Script as a Hypothesis: Scriptwriting for Documentary Film," *Journal of Screenwriting* 8, no. 1 (2017), 55–65.

8) Merewether, "Shaping the Documentary Subject."

9) John Iwuh and Nicodemus Adai Patrick, "Reading the Docufiction Script: Harnessing the Thin Line Between Facts and Fiction," *Journal of Screenwriting* 13, no. 3 (2022), 375–387.

However, a conceptual gap remains in operationalizing how emotional shifts and ethical dilemmas function not as obstacles, but as vital creative drivers in documentary storytelling. The concept of a “living script” bridges this gap by defining the script as an evolving narrative framework continuously reshaped by real-time discoveries, emotional shifts, and ethical recalibrations, thereby foregrounding the pursuit of emergent emotional truths.

The viability of this concept is substantiated by the flexible screenplay strategies of practitioners like independent filmmaker and academic Jill Daniels and interdisciplinary scholar and screen theorist Kathryn Millard. Daniels’s¹⁰⁾ conception of the script as a “working document” aligns perfectly with the ethos of the living script. She reinterprets the documentary form’s uncertainty as a source of creative plasticity, allowing the narrative to be shaped by “chance and the flexibility to change course.” In her film *Not Reconciled* (2009), a spontaneously witnessed fire was incorporated as a key structuring metaphor, altering the entire narrative’s thematic trajectory. Daniels uses her script — a “maggie collection of research findings, preliminary reflections and ideas”¹¹⁾ — to construct a film’s “emotional arc,” demonstrating how a multi-modal, evolving text can find its form through the process of its own making.

Similarly, Kathryn Millard’s¹²⁾ argument to reconceive screenplays as “design prototypes” provides a robust theoretical framework for the living script. Millard critiques rigid, linear “waterfall design” in screenwriting, advocating instead for an “iterative design” cycle of prototyping, testing, and refining. This model inherently embraces the “continuous reshaping” central to the living script. For her film *The Boot Cake* (2008), the “script” was a “grab-bag of Chaplin related relics,” with scenes emerging from the objects themselves to preserve a “sense of discovery.” This approach elevates found materials from props to narrative catalysts and affirms that a film’s affective core can be an emergent property. Millard notes how director Terrence Davies located the “emotional arc” for *Of Time and the City* (2008) “in the editing room,” confirming that emotional truth is often discovered through direct engagement with the material, not premeditated.

Considered in tandem, the frameworks of Daniels and Millard elucidate the argument for the living script. Both demonstrate that flexibility extends beyond logistical adaptation to a fundamental openness to creative and emotional evolution. Daniels’ reliance on “chance” and Millard’s cultivation of a “sense of discovery” illustrate how real-time events are not disruptions but primary catalysts for a more resonant narrative. By embracing multi-modal materials — from notebooks to physical objects — they expand the definition of a “script” from a purely textual object into a dynamic apparatus for creative development. Their work provides a compelling case for a methodology predicated on receptive engagement, substantiating the premise that the most powerful narratives are often those that are permitted to discover their inherent form.

10) Jill Daniels, “Scripting the Experimental Documentary Film: Developing the ‘Script’ for *Not Reconciled*,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Script Development*, eds. Stayci Taylor and Craig Betty (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 103–119.

11) *Ibid.*, 105.

12) Kathryn Millard, “The Screenplay as Prototype,” in *Analysing the Screenplay*, ed. Jill Nelmes (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 180–198.

Ultimately, the power of the living script lies in its synthesis of three core principles: flexibility, discovery, and affective truth. Flexibility is reframed from a mere practical concession to an essential creative methodology; it is the foundational willingness to abandon the blueprint in service of the story that is unfolding. This flexibility is what facilitates the process of discovery, where the filmmaker uncovers the narrative's most resonant themes, metaphors, and emotional arcs not by imposing them, but by remaining open to chance, context, and the agency of their subjects. The final goal of this fluid process is to achieve affective truth — an emotional and thematic resonance that feels more authentic and profound precisely because it was not predetermined. In this model, the script is a compass that helps navigate the unpredictable terrain of reality to find a truth that could not have been imagined at the outset.

Through the Living Script: Re-grounding Documentary Style and Engaging with Ethical Concerns

The living script resonates deeply with the spirit of *cinéma vérité* and the “cine-eye”¹³⁾ philosophy, yet it pushes these concepts further by integrating emotional and ethical recalibrations directly into the narrative's ongoing formation. Dziga Vertov's vision of a “mechanical eye” in “perpetual movement” prefigured the script's commitment to real-time responsiveness. Later, Jean Rouch¹⁴⁾ actualized this by transforming the camera into a “living camera,” enabling an improvisational “cine-trance” where the crew adapts organically to the action.

The living script advances this tradition by asserting that such on-the-spot adaptation is not merely technical or observational, but is fundamentally driven by emotion and ethics. The decision in *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* to recalibrate scenes to honour moments of vulnerability exemplifies a stylistic choice born from emotional resonance, not just logistical necessity. This embrace of an evolving text mirrors the flexible shooting style of *cinéma vérité*, where “editing while shooting”¹⁵⁾ became a reality.

However, the living script simultaneously acknowledges the inherent constructedness of any cinematic reality. It aligns with the self-awareness of films like Deborah Stratman's *Vever* (2018), which intentionally reveals its own constructed nature to the audience. Rather than feigning access to an “unmanipulated reality,” the living script understands its continuous evolution as an act of fabrication and imagination in pursuit of a “subjective” or “poetic, ecstatic truth,”¹⁶⁾ while taking ethical perspectives into account.

13) Shari Kizirian, “1929: Man With a Movie Camera (Dziga Vertov),” *Senses of Cinema*, 2017, accessed September 15, 2025, <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/soviet-cinema/man-with-movie-camera/#fn-32609-7>.

14) Jean Rouch, “The Camera and Man,” in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 1995), 79–98.

15) *Ibid.*, 90.

16) Miranda Harincar, “Constructed Reality: The Ethics of Subjective Truth in Filmmaking,” *Walker*, August 16, 2019, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/constructed-reality-ethics-subjective-truth-filmmaking-platforms/>.

By placing moral dimensions at its very heart, the living script directly addresses the complex ethical landscape of documentary film. It implicitly rejects the “persistent pretense of impartiality”¹⁷⁾ that Thomas Waugh identified as a failing in some *cinéma vérité*, leaning instead into Bill Nichols’s assertion that the filmmaker is always an “active fabricator of meaning.”¹⁸⁾

This framework finds its strongest precedent in Jean Rouch’s concept of “shared anthropology” or “audiovisual reciprocity.” His practice of showing rough cuts to his subjects — “the first public is the other, those whom I’ve filmed”¹⁹⁾ — and incorporating their feedback is a powerful model of the living script in action. Here, ethical considerations are not external checks but intrinsic drivers of the narrative. This stands in stark contrast to the manipulative practices of filmmakers like Joris Ivens, who admittedly tricked his “performers” to elicit “natural reactions.”²⁰⁾

Furthermore, the living script’s ethos demands a transparent and accountable relationship between filmmaker, subjects, and audience. It implicitly advocates for a “presentational” mode of performance in certain contexts, where the act of being filmed is openly acknowledged. This respects the subject’s agency and their “right to play oneself,” making the “author’s intention” and the “limitations of the medium” part of the visible narrative.²¹⁾

The living script provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how a creative documentary actively negotiates its style and ethics. By asserting that the narrative is in a constant state of flux — it moves beyond simplistic notions of objective capture. It positions the creative documentary as a profoundly human endeavor, where stylistic choices are deeply intertwined with the moral responsibility of representing evolving truths, and where the filmmaker’s ethical compass is a primary force in shaping the script until the very last moment, and beyond.

Living Script Approach Applied on a Case Study

A key distinction of the living script is its sensitivity to emotional resonance and ethical choices. While other analyses, such as Merewether’s, primarily focus on how scripts adapt to practical production changes, the living script equally prioritizes the emotional situation of filming. In a project like *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*, familial conflict is not just a narrative device but a dynamic force. Consequently, unexpected moments of vulnerability compel the filmmaker to recalibrate scenes, making emotional shifts — whether catharsis, grief, or joy — the primary catalysts for the script’s evolution. This process transforms drafts into documents that mirror the authentic emotional truths of their subjects.

Furthermore, this evolution is governed by an ethical-emotional alchemy, where moral considerations become engines of narrative change. Ethical dilemmas are treated as op-

17) Thomas Waugh, “Acting to Play Oneself: Performance in Documentary (1990),” in *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 71–92.

18) Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983), 17–30.

19) Rouch, “The Camera and Man,” 95.

20) Waugh, “Acting to Play Oneself,” 73.

21) *Ibid.*, 76.

portunities for profound re-evaluation. For instance, when a subject's trauma unexpectedly surfaces, the script reframes the narrative to prevent exploitation, which in turn can shift the film's focus from an individual story to a broader interrogation of social concerns.

Ultimately, this framework implies a deep co-creation between the filmmaker and participants. The script emerges not from a top-down structure but from a sustained dialogue where feedback and unplanned interactions are integral. This ensures the final narrative honors both the filmmaker's vision and the subjects' lived experiences. This responsiveness is also marked by a temporal urgency; when documenting unfolding events like a political crisis or a terminal illness, the script must remain agile, evolving in tandem with reality itself.

To investigate the living script in practice, this study employs a qualitative case study of *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*. The analysis draws from a set of archival materials, including early drafts, directorial notes, text for voice over, character charts, international co-production, and talent development application.

This archival analysis is supplemented by in-depth interviews with the filmmaker, Hu-maira Bilkis. The methodological focus is on how her script evolved through creative and ethical recalibrations, particularly under the influence of digital production practices and international collaboration.

A central pillar of this methodology is genetic criticism, specifically adapted for the film's born-digital workflow, which began in 2018. Although Bilkis initially drafted the treatment traditionally, the production soon shifted to a process where every stage was subject to continuous revision. To analyze this, I draw on Dirk Van Hulle's²²⁾ work on the logic of versions in born-digital literature. His framework helps treat the screenplay not as a fixed blueprint but as a series of "versions" that are reconfigured in response to emerging insights, allowing for a granular analysis of how digital tools facilitate a script's evolution.

In addition to digital iteration, the methodology accounts for the collaborative nature of Bilkis's international co-production. Constant communication with her French producer and editor was pivotal. Their contributions, from feedback on notes to real-time digital revisions, added another layer to the script's evolution. This process exemplifies a transcultural transfer, where the narrative dialogues with both local sensibilities and global aesthetic standards.

To deepen the analysis of the creative process, the study also incorporates Caterina Cucinotta's²³⁾ application of genetic criticism to film production. Cucinotta's focus on "process documents" and the "aesthetics of the unfinished" is particularly relevant. Here, Bilkis's archived notes, loglines, and early drafts function as process documents that capture the evolving interplay between creative vision and ethical responsibility.

22) Dirk Van Hulle, "The Logic of Versions in Born-Digital Literature," in *Genetic Criticism in Motion: New Perspectives on Manuscript Studies*, eds. Sakari Katajamäki and Veijo Pulkkinen (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2023), 61–73.

23) Caterina Cucinotta, "Time and Movement in the Process of Film Making: An Approximation to the Genetic Criticism of Costume Design in Raúl Ruiz's 'Mysteries of Lisbon,'" in *Time and Movement in the Process of Film Making*, eds. Bruno Marques, Luísa Soares de Oliveira, and Miguel Mesquita Duarte (Lisboa: Instituto de História da Arte, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, 2022), 46–55.

Finally, the methodology integrates a creative influence and proximity mapping, drawing parallels between Bilkis's work and the cinematic languages of Maya Deren and Chantal Akerman. This lens allows for a nuanced exploration of how a Global South artist navigates and reinterprets global aesthetic influences to address specific cultural imperatives.

In synthesis, these frameworks — Van Hulle's digital versioning, Cucinotta's process documents, and transcultural creative mapping — provide a multi-faceted lens for examining the living script. This triangulated approach moves beyond a simple description of the film's development to foreground the dialogic interplay between authorial intent and the emergent realities of production. By doing so, it reveals how the screenplay functions as a living document, continuously shaped by digital processes, collaborative dialogue, and ethical imperatives.

From Archive to Introspection: The Creative Process

While mainstream screenwriting theory acknowledges that writing is a dynamic process, the practical need for a fixed script can obscure this reality. The more nuanced question is how the dynamism of a documentary script differs from that of a feature film — a distinction vividly illustrated by the narrative film *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*. By adopting a documentary style, the film explores the tensions within Bangladeshi family, culture, and religion. Its nonlinear story blends dialogues between generations with inner monologues, poetry, and confessional scenes to build a textured narrative that feels both intimate and deeply relevant to society.

The initial drafts of the script reveal a conventional narrative outline that sought to document an organic progression of events — a strategy that would later be subverted by the evolving realities of production. Initial treatment indicates that Bilkis primarily envisioned a creative documentary, with a possibility of becoming a *cinéma vérité* instead of making or shaping a situation. Originally, the film was called *Bilkis and Bilkis*. Later, the filmmaker changed the title to the current one. Before the film found the current cinematic reality on the digital document, it was envisioned as she will explore her daughter-mother "relationship up close and personal, the many conflicts with which we live, our journey towards the pilgrimage (hajj), and the emotional outburst."²⁴ Moreover, at the beginning of the production, Bilkis composed a character chart²⁵ (fig. 1–2) where the film will end at Mecca. Nevertheless, the unprecedented reality of global pandemic played a pivotal role to change that treatment and incorporate the ongoing reality in the *living script*.

However, as production progressed, the director's notes began to reflect significant alterations. Emotional shifts observed during filming — such as the raw vulnerability or reluctance expressed by a subject during an intimate interview — prompted Bilkis to rework certain sequences, thereby infusing the narrative with a heightened emotional resonance. As she wrote in the treatment²⁶ for Docedge Kolkata pitching for production funding in 2018

24) "Idfa Document," Humaira Bilkis's Personal Archive, Dhaka: Bangladesh.

25) "Character Chart," Humaira Bilkis's Personal Archive, Dhaka: Bangladesh.

26) "Bilkis and Bilkis for docedge 2018 (final)," Humaira Bilkis's Personal Archive, Dhaka: Bangladesh.

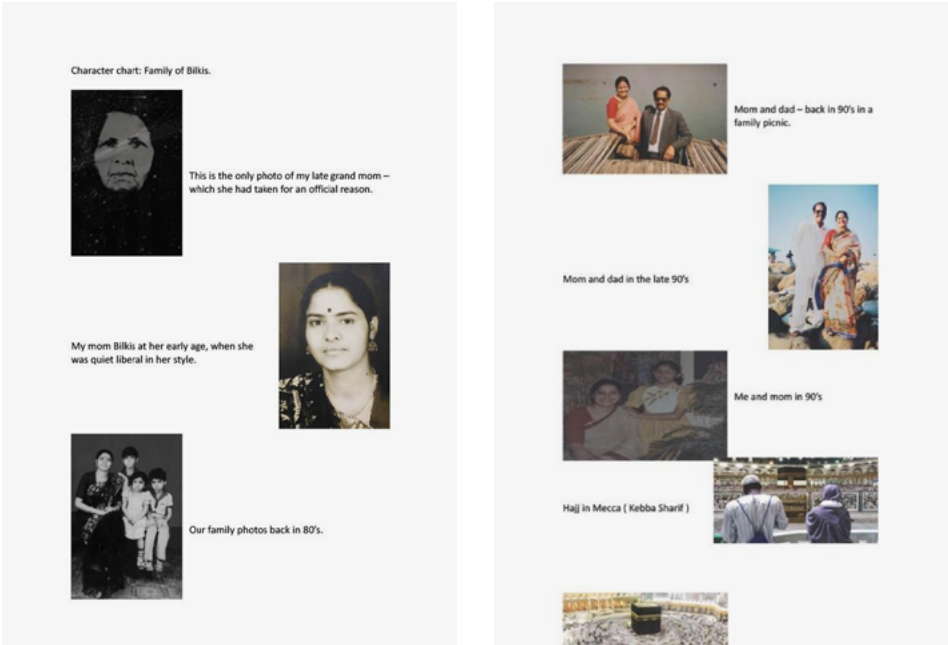


Fig. 1: Bilkis and Bilkis Character Chart

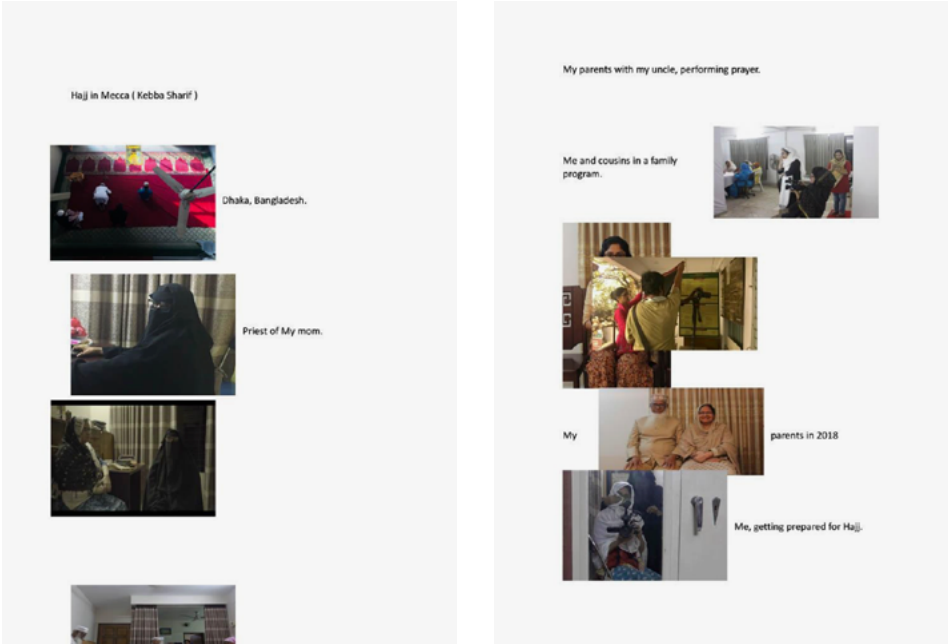


Fig. 2: Bilkis and Bilkis Mood board

Since the film is an extremely personal narrative based on a mother-daughter relationship, the struggle of the two characters, the ups and downs of their relationship, emotions, feelings etc. will be dealt with extreme care and sensitivity. However, in many cases, the mother expresses her reluctance and discontent towards the making of this film. But the film will self-consciously incorporate these due to the fact that the variance of opinions is the main theme of this film.

In the subsequent final version of the film, the audience sees a subtle tension between the mother and daughter which the filmmaker resolved or transformed into a fluid montage intercut with confessional monologues and real-time interactions, capturing the cathartic power of shared vulnerability. This transformation epitomizes the living script: a text that is continuously reshaped by unfolding emotional realities and ethical considerations.

The uncertainty performed an integral role in the screenwriting process,²⁷⁾ Bilkis's filmmaking practice engages with uncertainty through a dualistic methodology: preproduction/research and the archival documentation of actuality. In this context, she employs the camera not merely as a recording instrument but as an extension of her corporeal presence, enabling a phenomenological engagement with her subject matter. This approach fosters a fluid, improvisational mode of screenwriting, wherein playfulness becomes integral to the narrative construction. Historically, Bilkis's self-reflexive, first-person style aligns with Alexandre Astruc's conceptualization of the *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen) — a metaphor later reframed by Iranian auteur Abbas Kiarostami as a "drafting pen."²⁸⁾ This framework underscores a broader historiographic shift toward adaptive screenwriting practices. By embracing an "open creative process,"²⁹⁾ Bilkis eschews rigid narrative structures and pre-scripted dialogue, prioritizing instead the organic emergence of story form and dramatic resonance through on-location improvisation. Such a methodology not only navigates the indeterminacy inherent in the living script but also reconfigures cinematic reality as a dynamic interplay between intention and serendipity.

This screenwriting approach reflects an ethical recalibration regarding prioritizing authenticity and emotional truth over pre-established narrative structure. In doing so, the film's script evolved to acknowledge the complexity of its subjects' lived experiences. The living script framework is particularly evident in the way ethical dilemmas were addressed during production. When faced with the challenge of representing trauma sensibly, Bilkis creatively decided to situate the trauma in the background of the script, instead of putting it in the foreground. This choice gave her more room to establish the psychological distance and intergenerational gap of worldview with her parents, grounding the narrative ethically. This responsiveness to ethical imperatives is a hallmark of the living script, underscoring its role as both a creative and moral document.

27) Margot Nash, "Unknown Spaces and Uncertainty in Film Development," *Journal of Screenwriting* 4, no. 2 (2013), 149–162.

28) Kathryn Millard, *Screenwriting in a Digital Era* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 136–157.

29) Alex Munt, "Digital Kiarostami & the open screenplay," *SCAN: Journal of Media Arts Culture* 3, no. 2 (2006), accessed February 4, 2025, http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=74.

Bridging Genetic Criticism and Transcultural Transfer

Traditional genetic criticism, which traces a text's linear development toward a final form, is often too limiting when applied to creative documentaries. A documentary's script is a processual text, continuously reshaped by the filmmaker's vision and by the flux of real-life events and the ethical nuances of interacting with subjects.

This analysis challenges traditional assumptions by positioning the living script within a transcultural framework, opening new avenues for understanding narrative evolution in global cinema. Drawing on the introspective aesthetics of directors such as Chantal Akerman and Maya Deren, the living script framework reveals how a Global South filmmaker like Humaira Bilkis negotiates her unique cultural, ethical, and political contexts. I find Akerman's influence is an invisibly visible presence in the creative approach. As critic Srikanth Srinivasan observes, this resonance is evident when he states:

Like Chantal Akerman in *No Home Movie* (2015), the filmmaker holds on to images of her mother as a way of warding off her physical disappearance. In a process of filial reciprocation, she offers documentary images in return for her mother's poems, which had so far provided commentary to her life. "May this film give a new dimension to our togetherness," she muses, "the same way my mother's poems give a new meaning to my life."³⁰

Besides, in an interview with me, Bilkis confirmed she finds Maya Deren's work stylistically close to her own artistic vision. I will explore this concept in detail in the following sections.

A notable parallel can be drawn between Bilkis's creative approach and Akerman's style of generating narrative through filmic syntax rather than conventional plot development. *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother's* structure emerges through what we might call documented contemplation. Bilkis's camera becomes both confessional and confrontational booth and dialogue partner, creating space for spontaneous revelations while maintaining narrative coherence. This approach echoes Akerman's method in *News from Home* (1977), where the reading of letters creates a temporal framework while allowing for emergent meaning through visual juxtaposition. The living script framework reveals its strength in how it facilitates cultural mediation. Bilkis's film navigates between traditional Bangladeshi values and contemporary global perspectives not through explicit commentary but through formal choices that emerge during writing on the screen. This approach is similar to Akerman's *Je Tu Il Elle* (I, You, He, She, 1974), where personal experience becomes a lens for examining broader social structures. While Akerman's work often positions the mother as an absent presence (particularly in *News from Home*), Bilkis inverts this dynamic, making maternal presence the central tension of her film. Both filmmakers employ what we might call durational intimacy — long takes that allow relationships to reveal

30) Srikanth Srinivasan, "With Rehana, Things I Could Never Tell My Mother, Bangladesh's Cinema Has Its Moment in the Sun," *News9live*, April 26, 2022, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://www.news9live.com/art-culture/cinema/with-rehana-things-i-could-never-tell-my-mother-bangladeshs-cinema-has-its-moment-in-the-sun-166430>.

themselves through time rather than action. However, where Akerman's mother exists primarily through letters, Bilkis's camera confronts maternal authority directly, creating a different kind of tension and relief that speaks to specific cultural contexts of South Asian family dynamics.

Things I Could Never Tell My Mother's exploration of intergenerational distance employs what Maya Deren termed vertical investigation³¹⁾ — diving deep into moments rather than moving horizontally through plot points. Like Deren's *At Land* (1944), Bilkis's film treats time as malleable, allowing past and present to coexist within single sequences by juxtaposing old photo albums, memories and remembrance of the past. This approach manifests particularly in scenes where religious practice intersects with personal desire or parents joyfully talking about their past creating what we might call emotional palimpsests — layers of meaning that accumulate through repetition and revision. Deren's exploration of ritual and mythology finds interesting parallels in Bilkis's documentation of daily household routine and religious practice. Both filmmakers understand ritual as both constraint and possibility. However, where Deren's approach is often mythological and abstract, Bilkis grounds these explorations in concrete daily practice. The living script framework allows Bilkis to discover moments where routine religious observance becomes a site of both conflict and connection (fig. 3), which particularly denoted through the scenes where she, her mother and the female Quran tutor had antagonising conversations about what the holy book asserts for the followers and how Bilkis situates those notions in the contemporary world.



Fig. 3: A self-portrait of Bilkis with Bilkis in the space between the camera's gaze and the mirror's reflection. A still from *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*

31) Erin Brannigan, "Maya Deren: Strategies for Dancefilm," in *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 100–124.

Including Bilkis, both filmmakers transform domestic space into a territory for philosophical and political exploration. In Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), the home becomes a psychological landscape, while Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) reimagines it as a site of feminist critique. Bilkis, on the other hand, positions domestic space as a battleground between tradition and self-reflection. Windows, as a recurring motif, serve as another shared thread among these three filmmakers. In their works, windows transcend their function as mere architectural elements, becoming psychological and existential symbols that reveal the inner lives of their characters. For Deren, windows act as portals to the subconscious, reflecting the fluidity and fragmentation of identity. In Akerman's films, windows function as sites of confinement and surveillance, mirroring the alienation and rigidity of gendered existence. Bilkis, meanwhile, uses windows to convey the state of mind of her characters, often in deeply connotative and symbolic ways. In her films, windows serve as liminal spaces — thresholds between interior and exterior worlds — that reflect psychological, emotional, and existential conditions.

Akerman's measured, meditative pacing and Deren's amateur and feminist ethnographic lens serve as potent counterpoints to the dominant, formulaic approaches to screenwriting that have historically characterized mainstream cinema. Rather than simply borrowing stylistic devices, Bilkis's work reconfigures these transcultural influences to articulate a narrative that is both locally grounded and universally meaningful. In this light, the living script becomes a dialogic space in which diverse cinematic traditions intersect. Rather than simply transplanting formal elements across cultures, the focus is on negotiating meaning in a way that addresses local needs. The evolving narrative framework of *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* reflects this process, as the treatment is continually revised in response to both the immediate emotional realities on set and the broader ethical imperatives that arise from its social context. This approach challenges genetic criticism's tendency to freeze the creative process into a series of discrete, measurable stages, instead emphasizing the constant, iterative nature of narrative formation. Moreover, this transcultural transfer is not unidirectional. While global south filmmakers may draw inspiration from Western auteurs, they also contribute to an expanded, pluralistic understanding of screenwriting that enriches the global cinematic dialogue.

Ethical-Emotional Alchemy as a Creative Force

One of the most profound contributions of the living script is its capacity to foreground ethical and emotional dimensions as central creative forces rather than peripheral concerns. In conventional screenwriting, ethical dilemmas are often relegated to postproduction adjustments or treated as unavoidable obstacles that must be managed through technical fixes. As Maras argues in his examination of screenwriting ethics, conventional approaches tend to treat moral considerations as secondary concerns rather than integral narrative elements³². The living script, however, posits that ethical and emotional chal-

32) Steven Maras, "Ethics beyond the Code," in *Ethics in Screenwriting: New Perspectives*, ed. Steven Maras (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1–30.

lenges are not impediments to narrative coherence but are in fact integral to the creative process. This ethical-emotional alchemy reframes moments of vulnerability, distress, or moral uncertainty as catalysts for narrative transformation³³.

For instance, in *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*, moments of raw emotional disclosure — such as Bilkis's reaction during the final conversation with her Hindu partner over the text messages — prompt immediate script revisions. Rather than attempting to erase or minimize these emergent moments, the living script framework recognizes them as essential components of the film's authenticity. The process of ethical-emotional alchemy involves a recalibration of narrative priorities: emotional truths and ethical responsibilities become embedded within the script, actively shaping the film's structure and thematic focus. Also, when Bilkis and her mother found out that her father was living with dementia, her mother expressed discomfort or vulnerability, the script is not merely adjusted to comply with ethical guidelines; it is transformed in a way that amplifies the film's overall authenticity and emotional resonance.

The living script reconceptualizes narrative structure as a responsive and evolving document, challenging the traditional notion of a rigid, predetermined plan. Building on scholarly ideas of scripts as "living documents," this framework emphasizes the affective dimension, viewing the creative process as a site of ethical-emotional negotiation. Within this model, ethical dilemmas and emotional shifts are not obstacles but transformative forces that continuously integrate into and recalibrate the narrative's trajectory. This challenges the classic dichotomy between form and content, suggesting instead that a film's structure emerges directly from the unpredictable, lived experiences of its subjects. The living script thus functions as an ethical and emotional barometer, guiding the filmmaking process to ensure the final work remains true to the people and events it documents.

Implications for Global South Screenwriting

For filmmakers operating within the global south, the concept of the living script offers a liberatory framework that challenges both dominant screenwriting conventions, and the unique constraints imposed by local sociopolitical contexts. In many non-Western settings, filmmakers confront a multitude of challenges, ranging from limited financial and technical resources to political censorship and cultural pressures that demand innovative narrative strategies. The living script, by virtue of its iterative and responsive nature, provides a mode of storytelling that is particularly well-suited to these conditions. It valorizes the dynamic interplay between intention and improvisation, allowing filmmakers to capture the nuanced realities of their cultural environments in a manner that is both innovative and ethically grounded.

In the case of *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*, Bilkis's evolving screenplay reflects the tensions inherent in global south filmmaking. The living script framework enables Bilkis to negotiate these complexities by continually revising the narrative in response to unfolding revelations and ethical dilemmas. This approach enhances the film's authentic-

33) Merewether, "Shaping the Documentary Subject," 89–113.

ity and empowers the filmmaker to assert a creative vision that is both locally specific and globally resonant. Furthermore, the living script highlights the importance of collaboration and co-creation in overcoming resource limitations and political challenges. In international co-productions, such as Bilkis's work, constant communication with the creative collaborators — like her French Producer Quentin Laurent and French Editor Léa Chatauret — ensures that the script remains adaptive and responsive. The primary challenge Bilkis faced was explaining her local sociopolitical culture to others. She needed them to understand why, as an independent adult, she struggled with societal pressures when choosing an interfaith partner. This included clarifying her mother's insistence on her marrying a Muslim man, as well as addressing concerns from creative collaborators in France who grew alarmed after seeing news reports about honor killings in India related to interfaith relationships. These transnational collaborations exemplify how the living script functions as a dynamic, evolving document that is continuously reshaped through collective negotiation.

By integrating insights from diverse cultural and technical practices, the living script fosters a sense of shared authorship, wherein every contribution becomes part of an ongoing dialogue between intention, collaboration, and reality. It enables a form of narrative resilience that is essential for capturing the complexities of life in contexts marked by both cultural vibrancy and political instability. In doing so, the living script redefines narrative filmmaking and also contributes to a broader understanding of how creative practices can serve as sites of resistance, transformation, and cultural renewal.

Conclusion: The Living Script as an Adaptive Practice

This article has proposed the concept of the living script as an adaptive practice that bridges screenwriting theories and documentary aesthetics. By analyzing Humaira Bilkis's screen production, this study has shown how a script can function as a living document — responsive to the emotional shifts, ethical dilemmas, and collaborative discoveries that shape narrative filmmaking. This model challenges traditional, static notions of screenwriting, reframing it as a dynamic negotiation between intention and reality.

Future research could explore how digital tools and collaborative platforms further enhance this adaptive practice, especially as the lines between production phases continue to blur. Comparative studies examining the living script across diverse cultural contexts would also be invaluable, contributing to a decolonized screenwriting scholarship that values non-Western narrative traditions.

Ultimately, the living script is an arrangement to an ongoing dialogue between the filmmaker, the subject, and the unpredictable nature of lived experience. It is through this adaptive practice that films like *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* capture the profound complexities of human existence, offering a vision of storytelling that is both ethically engaged and transculturally resonant.

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- A Journey of a Thousand Miles: Peacekeepers* (Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, 2015)
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- Je Tu Il Elle* (Chantal Akerman, 1974)
- Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975)
- Meshes of the Afternoon* (Chantal Akerman, 1943)
- News from Home* (Chantal Akerman, 1977)
- Not Reconciled* (Jill Daniels, 2009)
- Of Time and the City* (Terrence Davis, 2008)
- The Boot Cake* (Kathryn Millard, 2008)
- Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* (Humaira Bilkis, 2022)
- Vever* (Deborah Stratman, 2018)

Biography

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