

# The Participatory Documentary 'Age Is Just a Bingo Number'

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/sro](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sro)**Simona Palladino** 

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## Abstract

The film 'Age is Just a Bingo Number' is a mid-length (40minutes) participatory documentary exploring the experiences of a community of ageing Italians in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. As a product of social science research, this documentary aims to bridge the gap between academia and the general audience, by disseminating research findings in creative ways, through art practices. This documentary constitutes an empirical contribution to the sociology of community studies, by exploring the social interactions of a small place-based group of older migrants. Hence, the documentary introduces the audience to a recreational centre in the heart of the city, where the participants gather on a weekly basis to play Bingo. This place, and the sense of community it conveys, aims at promoting social aspects of the environment for older people. Furthermore, by illustrating how older migrants can become closely attached to places, it aims at raising awareness of issues of ageing in the context of migration. In this sense, the film is an original contribution to the sociology of ageing and transnational migration.

## Keywords

ageing, community, migration, participatory documentary

*Age is Just a Bingo Number* is a 40-minute documentary exploring the experiences of a community of ageing Italians in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK.<sup>1</sup> This documentary constitutes an empirical contribution to the sociology of community studies (Bell and Newby, 2021; Bruhn, 2011) by exploring the social interactions of a small place-based group of older migrants. The documentary introduces the audience to a recreational centre in the heart of the city, where the participants gather weekly to play Bingo. This place and its sense of community aim to promote social aspects of the environment for older people. Furthermore, by illustrating how older migrants can become deeply attached to places (Gieryn, 2000), it raises awareness of issues of ageing in the context of migration. Thus, the film is an original contribution to the sociology of ageing (Phillipson, 2013) and transnational migration (Torres, 2013).

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Released in May 2018, the documentary aims to bridge the gap between academia and the general audience, by disseminating research findings in creative ways, through art practices. Hence, it is the research-informed output of the public engagement project, *Film-ethnography with older Italian migrants in Newcastle upon Tyne*.<sup>2</sup> This was prompted by my PhD data collection about affective bonds between people and places (see Palladino, 2019, 2022, 2023). Therefore, the filming project was intrinsically linked to the previous ethnographic fieldwork; however, the two studies differ in their aims, methodology and ethical considerations and were only partially conducted with the same participants. Nevertheless, the richness of the narrative captured during the community-based filmmaking experience was made possible by the access, knowledge and accountability developed over time. In this sense, the film constitutes an extension of ethnographic practice.

This film was realised as, during my PhD, it became apparent that the community of older Italians I was working with, those who could benefit more from the outcomes of my research, lacked access and resources to academic writing. Thus, this project was prompted by the need to transfer knowledge into the community and to communicate findings to a non-academic audience. Therefore, I embraced creative art practices to return the data into the community in which these were gathered. As such, the film can be seen as an act of restitution of the interpretation to participants (Portelli, 2005).

The film appears to take place within one Bingo match; however, the filmmaking lasted for nine months (four months of filming and five months of editing and post-production). Filming began in September 2017 and was conducted weekly, for a total of 24 hours of filmed material. All filming sessions lasted, on average, for three hours, primarily at a community centre.<sup>3</sup>

Participants are both male and female older people, aged between 60 and 85 years. The majority are first-generation migrants from different regions of Italy who migrated during their youth. Some were second- or third-generation Italians. However, several

participants were not specifically of Italian origins but were connected by friendship or were neighbours or partners.

The participants' voices are woven into a narrative logic that revolves around subjective experiences and social practices. This aims at presenting a holistic picture of community life despite allowing many individuals to emerge in their fullness and distinctiveness. Consequently, there are multiple characters within the film, in which none tends to predominate, as a texture of different, often counterbalancing, viewpoints are presented by various participants.

The film sequences are assembled according to the thematic, not in the actual order in which these events occurred or were filmed. No library footage is adopted, nor is material recycled from other films. It privileges showing, not telling, over a pattern of exposition, such as voice-over, to challenge the concept of the omniscient narrator in documentary practice. Instead, the film invites the audience to draw socially critical conclusions; hence, it welcomes an open interpretation by the viewers.

Participation in the filming process was based on informed consent, in line with the code of practice in research at Newcastle University.<sup>4</sup> The video disclaimer clearly stated the aims and nature of the research project; what participation in the study would entail; who to speak to if participants had further questions; ownership and dissemination. Participants were given opportunities to ask questions throughout the research process. There was no reason to withhold information from participants or to provide financial or other incentives.

The film highlights shared values and cultural meanings, by showing the community structure of interdependence and solidarity, via migration-related social practices (Amelina and Horvath, 2017) such as socialising, playing Bingo, cooking and sharing food, singing, playing music, dancing and talking through artefacts. In fact, I was looking for strategies that enable me to capture aspects of the community's everyday life that were otherwise difficult to document (non-verbal communication, accents from places of provenance, songs etc.). Thus, a participatory documentary practice was identified as the most suitable methodology for these purposes.

This is because the participatory mode of documentary filmmaking legitimises the camera's presence and direct engagement with participants (Nichols, 2017). In *Age is Just a Bingo Number*, the direct interaction between filmmakers and community members is the key element of the narrative structure. In fact, the person behind the camera remains off-screen and unheard but follows the interactions among social actors, including the researcher who engages in conversation with the community members. Hence, the film comprises action footage: showing participants carrying on their activities within the community setting, talking to each other or addressing the filmmakers directly. This discrete mode of participation during the film practices allows the collectivity to emerge as a socially established and institutionally legitimated voice by co-producing the new cultural artefact. In line with Margolis (1994), recordings of social processes via the means of a camera enable to challenge the 'one-way' experience of written documentation, 'for sociologists to present their findings; they also have the potential to reduce the dualism experimenter/experiential subject [. . .] encouraging "subjects" to participate actively in the research and take a critical role in the presentation of research findings' (Margolis, 1994: 129). Therefore, the film achieves its intended purposes by situating

subjects involved in these interactions – both participants and the filmmakers – within the historical and sociological context and by giving participants a voice to their own representation.

With this objective in mind, after the film production, in May 2018, we organised a private screening launch event for both participants and their family members. This opportunity allowed participants to express their views on the film via written forms and verbal comments. Until August 2018, participants were invited to attend a follow-up meeting with me to share their critical reflections. These meetings, in the community setting, were filmed or audio-recorded. Some participants expressed the will to edit their contributions. For ethical responsibility, we agreed to edit the film accordingly. The final version of the film is, in fact, the result of these negotiations, which enriched the participants' involvement and strengthened the relationship of trust between the researchers and the community members.

Members of the community were further invited to public screenings, from August 2018 onwards, and were actively involved in Q&As with general members of the public. Aiming at stimulating debates and improving public understanding of ageing and migration, these events constituted further opportunities for the participants to have a say.

At the time of writing, *Age is Just a Bingo Number* has been selected by 15 International Film Festivals and has been awarded at the International Social Change Film Festival (US, August 2022); Rameshwaram International Film Festival (India, April 2021); South Coast Film Festival (UK, August 2020); Mediterranean Film Festival (Cannes, November 2019); Pietro Corsi Award (Italy, August 2019).

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## Notes

1. The documentary has been realised by Simona Palladino (Director), Evripidis Karydis (Cinematographer); Simona Palladino and Evripidis Karydis (Editing); Alastair Cole (Executive Producer); James Davoll (Post-Production); Screen Language (Translation & Subtitling).
2. This project constitutes an award made to Simona Palladino (FMS-Call-2017, £4742), and it represents a collaboration between the Newcastle University Engage FMS and the Institute for Creative Arts Practice, Film@CultureLab. The budget covered production costs, launch event at Newcastle Tyneside Cinema and 100 DVDs distributed to participants.
3. This recreational social hub, in Newcastle City Centre, is hosted by an Irish Social Club, located in Chinatown. Some footage took place in other venues identified as key places for this community: Church Hall in Ponteland, Prima Restaurant in City Centre and Church Hall in Jarrow. Some scenes were filmed in private dwellings.
4. Approved by the Ethical Committee at Newcastle University (Ref. 2017-16).

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## Author biography

Simona Palladino is a Lecturer in Social Sciences at Liverpool Hope University (since January 2020), interested in ageing and migration. During her Doctoral Degree at Newcastle University (2019), she conducted an ethnographic research about older migrants' with a thesis entitled 'Place attachment and place identity among older Italians in Newcastle upon Tyne'. She presented her project at several international conferences (among others at 'Migrating Objects: Material culture and Italian Identity' organised by the Calandra Italian American Institute in New York, for other relevant conferences in the UK, San Francisco, and Seoul). She directed the documentary 'Age is Just a Bingo Number', as a project of public engagement. Launched in 2018, the film is currently in consideration for film festivals. Simona is a Fellow of Higher Education (PGCertLTHE). She was a Visiting Fellow at the University of Portsmouth (2011–2012) and Université Libre de Bruxelles (2013). She studied her Bachelor's and Master Degree at 'La Sapienza', University of Rome (2004–2011).

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