From Documentary Film to Video Essay: The Invention of Screen Realism

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From its earliest days, documentary cinema has dealt with history, both on a small and a large scale, with identity, intimacy, and that which can best be described as otherness. When Louis Lumière filmed his family, his factory, or a train pulling into the station at La Ciotat, he invented at one and the same time the home movie, the publicity film, and the news reel. Almost immediately, however, this Lyon businessman became more ambitious, sending cameramen to film important events such as the coronation of Czar Nicolas II in May 1896. This was to result in the first example of censorship in the history of cinema.[1] While the origins of cinema and filmed documentaries are generally attributed to the Lumière brothers, the name of Méliès, better known for his *Voyage dans la lune* and *Quatre cents farces du diable,* is frequently forgotten in this context. His works of "reconstituted actuality" include *The Dreyfus Affair* (1899), one of the first politically committed films in the history of cinema, in which Méliès defends the unjustly accused French officer, setting out the events that had taken place a short time before the invention of cinematography.

Similarly and so as not to get in the way of the ceremony, Méliès filmed, in advance, a reconstruction of the coronation of Edward VII in his studios outside Paris. The day after the coronation, the delighted king declared: "I recognized myself immediately, and the queen too. If I were not sure of the contrary, I should have said we were watching ourselves."[2] Even

[1] Two days after the official ceremonies, the czar appeared before the people. A balcony collapsed and the crowd panicked, causing the police to charge those close to the imperial platform. Instead of interrupting their filming, the cameramen continued to shoot. Their equipment and film were seized. A new kind of journalism was born that day.

[2] George Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma,* vol. 2: *Les pionniers du cinéma (de Méliès à Pathé) 1897–1909* (Paris, 1973), p. 212.

more surprisingly, in 1898, Francis Doublier, one of the Lumière cameramen sent to Russia, in response to the insistent requests of Jewish communities in the south of the country, offered up as illustration of the Dreyfus Affair a montage of heterogeneous images that were in fact unrelated to it. Was this the first fake in cinema history or the first documentary essay? In reality it was neither one nor the other, being, on the one hand, a brilliant montage and, on the other, an anticipation of the art of reenactment.

Examples such as these illustrate how, from the very outset, cinema had to invent its relationship to the world, even if that required reconstruction, and despite the oft repeated myth of events "captured from life" in real time. Every time, it is a matter of *inventing* reality, in the way that it could be said that Christopher Columbus invented America rather than discovering it—of finding the strategies and idiom that will most effectively contribute to its recreation. To reveal reality, it is not enough merely to film it any more than it is enough to see something to understand it—the illusion of the visible. From its beginnings, realist cinema—and, today, the video essay—has always involved a balancing act between reality as such and its restitution or reconstruction, whether by means of montage or an installation, as a narrative, a discourse involving the arrangement or rearrangement of disparate elements, image, and sound—the visible and the word—so as to render the invisible visible and to give voice to that which cannot be said.

Historical Landmarks

After a summary glance at the outstanding moments in the history of documentary cinema and of the different strategies employed to transcribe reality, it soon becomes apparent that there are two main tendencies. On the one hand, documentary film and fiction are effectively combined in balanced proportions. On the other, there is the lure of the essay with its various discursive forms—dialectic, reflective or, today, performative. Any overview of these

moments involves consideration of the ethnographical, political, and more broadly social intentions that inspired them.

The two founding fathers of the documentary, Robert Flaherty and Denis Kaufman, alias Dziga Vertov, embody perfectly the two tendencies discussed above. Although Flaherty is usually associated with staged reality and Vertov with montage, the truth is much less straightforward. Beginning with *Nanook of the North* (1922), Flaherty did indeed use staged scenes to reconstruct the already long-abandoned traditional daily life of the Inuit people. The famous seal-hunting scene, for example, is faked, while the igloo was constructed without a roof in order to make use of daylight for filming. In *Man of Aran,* this approach is even more marked: Flaherty chooses actors to portray his ideal family and reconstructs a shark hunt last practiced on the island over fifty years before. As is often said: the documentary film maker arrives when it is already too late. Using montage, he creates something akin to a symphony full of drama and lyricism, a ode to humanity struggling to survive against the forces of nature. The human beings celebrated by Dziga Vertov were, by contrast, the new Soviet people. His use of political montage, its formal and semantic effects opening the way to the discursive essay, has been much admired. Often overlooked is the fact that a considerable number of the sequences in *Man with a Movie Camera* were staged and in no way captured spontaneously on film. Despite this, Vertov has given us an unforgettable lesson in filmmaking.

In the nineteen-fifties, reacting against the style of presentation where “the voice of God” style of narration becomes more important than the images (the ancestor of present-day television reporting), mavericks like Georges Franju, Alain Renais, and Chris Marker found ways to subvert the requirements of commissioned work. They had, as a result, recurring problems with the censors. Films such as the anti-militarist *Hôtel des Invalides* (1951), the fiercely anti-colonialist and long censored *Les statues meurent aussi* (1953), and *Nuit et*

Brouillard (1956), a film that opened the eyes of all Europe to the truth about the concentration camps, laid the foundations of what was to become the present-day essay, asserting the role of a subjective and critical eye, a "documented point of view," such as that put forward by Jean Vigo in *À propos de Nice* (1930). Among the finest contemporary examples of this tradition are Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) which travels between two extremes of survival, Africa and Japan, moving in past, present, and future time, and Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–98). The term "reflexive" or "performative" is often used to describe works of this type.

With the arrival of lighter cameras and synchronous sound in the early sixties, two main strands emerged. The first, in America, was Direct Cinema. Rejecting any kind of staging, interview, or commentary, it was championed by Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, the Maysles brothers, and, more recently, Frederick Wiseman. Their filming method can be described as *observational*. The second strand is that of cinéma-vérité, as exemplified by Vertov's heir Jean Rouch, where use is made of staging or editing. Rouch's film *Moi, un Noir* (1959) was to give an identity to postcolonial Africa and inspire the Nouvelle Vague[3]. Robert Kramer, well-know for his opposition to the Vietnam War, used a cinéma-vérité style for his *Route One/USA* of 1989, a film in which he examines the fragmented identity of the United States. Similarly, Johan van der Keuken's works are concerned with the relations between North and South and particularly with the multiculturalism resulting from globalization as explored in his masterpiece, *Amsterdam Global Village* (1996). Here the camera can be described as participatory.[4]

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[3] Writing of *Moi, un Noir* at the time when he was still a critic for the *Cahiers du cinéma,* Jean-Luc Godard said*:* "All great fiction films tend towards the documentary just as all great documentaries tend towards fiction."

[4] Today, when the distinction between fiction and documentary seems almost obsolete, realist filmmakers are concerned more than ever with the fragmentation of identity in the global world with its displaced populations and new frontiers. Bruno Ulmer with *Welcome Europa* (2006), Patric Jean with *D'un mur l'autre, De Berlin à Ceuta* (2008), and Fernand Melgar with *La Forteresse* (2008) are just a few examples of films exploring these themes by means of Direct Cinema, film essay, or fiction.

Ethical Considerations

In concluding this brief historical survey, we should pause to consider some of the ethical principles of the documentary. Going beyond the views on the subject of aesthetics held by not only that first theoretician of the documentary, John Grierson, but also by a number of differing schools of documentary makers, it is necessary to identify the underlying and sacrosanct "documentary pact." This is based on the idea of "truth as adequation" or "truth as correspondence," defined by Aristotle 2,500 years ago and, more recently, by Ludwig Wittgenstein. What I say of what is must correspond to what is, or as the latter writes in the *Tractatus:* "In order to tell whether a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality."[5] Thus the documentary is limited by facts: the realist filmmaker is just as beholden to what he or she films as to the audience being addressed. The documentary charter can be summarized in three indissolubly linked elements: the filmmaker, the filmed, and the spectator. Within this relationship, everything happens *as if* each position could be interchangeable.

Contemporary Issues

Two problems in our examination of the history of the documentary remain unresolved. First, there is the *rational ideology* according to which it would suffice to explain the images in the most educational way possible so as to exhaust reality. This ideology reached its extreme limit and aporia with propaganda cinema where the word takes over from the images. Television reports are the modern-day heirs of this movement. Second, there is the *ideology of the visible:* in order to seize reality as it is, it is necessary to keep a sufficient distance from it. Here too, the techniques of today's media find their justification. All that the filmmaker needs to do to capture reality is to place a camera in the midst of the event. This view ignores the fact that, on the one hand, every image unfolds from a single viewpoint and every

[5] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus,* 2.223 (Paris, 1961), p. 36. Translation from online version in English: http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5740 (release date October 22, 2010).

montage imposes a precise meaning, and, on the other, it acts on the assumption that the camera is invisible, which is wishful thinking. This brings our contemporary images into double discredit. The work of the realist filmmaker, like that of a committed artist using moving images, will aim in future to overcome these contradictions, favoring invention over convention and montage over "montrage."

During the Second Gulf War (1990–91), Serge Daney defined in a seminal text the by-now classic distinction between the image and the visual: "The visual has no reverse angle, it is complete in itself, in a loop, a little like the image of a pornographic show which is merely the ecstatic verification of the functioning of the sex organs and nothing more."[6] The unchanging images of the endlessly collapsing Twin Towers, without depth, without reverse angles, is a perfect illustration of what he means by the visual. The image, by contrast, "is always found on the borderline between two force fields. Its role is to bear witness to a certain otherness and, while it has a hard core, it is never entirely complete . . . where there is something other, that is the cinema image." Forty years after André Bazin put forward the idea that montage should be forbidden, Daney defends its use, writing: "The image always challenges us to show it with another, with something else. Because in the image, as in democracy, there is interplay, incompleteness, beginnings or gaps."

Another important text is that by Gilles Deleuze in which he defines cinematic modernity by the gesture that rescues the image from the snapshot,[7] with which we are bombarded by all the powers that be by means of the intervening media. The most productive contemporary

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[6] Serge Daney, "Le montage obligé," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 442 (April 1991).

[7] "Civilization of the image? In fact, it is a civilization of the cliché where all the powers have an interest in hiding images from us, not necessarily hiding the same thing from us, but in hiding something in the image. On the other hand, at the same time, the image constantly attempts to break through the cliché, to get out of the cliché." To assist the image in throwing off the cliché, the French philosopher notes that "it is necessary to restore the lost parts, to rediscover everything that cannot be seen in the image, everything that has been removed to make it 'interesting.' But sometimes, on the contrary, it is necessary to make holes, to introduce voids and white spaces, to rarify the image, by suppressing many things that have been added to make us believe that we were seeing everything." Gilles Deleuze, *L'Image-temps* (Paris, 1985), p. 33. English trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, *Cinema 2 the time image,* 3rd ed. (London, 2005). It will be noticed that we have moved on from the notion of truth as adequation to that of truth as production, shifting the accent from representation to creation.

filmmakers, first Robert Kramer or Johan van der Keuke and later Avi Mograbi, Wu Wenguang,[8] Joana Hadjithomas, and Khalil Joreige, employ strategies that make it possible to salvage the image from the snapshot, allowing us to see reality in a different way. Whether mixtures of fiction and documentary, dialectic montages in the style of Chris Marker or Jean-Luc Godard, installations or videos by Ursula Biemann (ill. p. ##), Ingrid Wildi Merino (ill. p. ##), Frank Westermeyer and Sylvie Boisseau (ill. p. ##), or Camilo Yañez (ill. p. ##), all these works seek to offer a different way of seeing reality, globalization and its effects, displaced peoples, and contemporary social injustice. They remind us also that concern with form is also an act of resistance and hence a political act.

[8] The aforementioned two filmmakers can be seen as performative, affirming as they do subjectivity and reflexivity, bringing together performance and documentary.