

VIRTUAL ROUND TABLE: AN EXPERIMENT  
MESA REDONDA VIRTUAL: UM ENSAIO

Composed by Susana Nascimento Duarte and Stefanie Baumann

The following pages are the outcome of an experimental approach. Rather than including a classical interview, we decided to compose an imaginary conversation between documentary filmmakers, film scholars and philosophers from different contexts concerned with the philosophical, aesthetic and political dimensions of documentary film. In order to engage the discussion, we have sent a set of questions to each participant, requesting to either answer them directly, or to comment on related subjects. With the statements we have received, we have attempted to compose, through a dialogical structure, a virtual round table discussion. The following version is thus only a possible configuration. Another hypothetical version – which emphasizes potential connections between the contributions through a spatial and constellational montage – is available in the annex of this issue.

PARTICIPANTS:

José BÉRTOLO, PhD, is a researcher on Film Studies at the University of Lisbon Centre for Comparative Studies. His last book is *Espectros do Cinema: Manoel de Oliveira e João Pedro Rodrigues* [Spectres of Cinema: Manoel de Oliveira and João Pedro Rodrigues, Documenta, 2020].

Christa BLÜMLINGER is Professor in film studies at the University Paris VIII. Her publications include books about essay film, media art, avant-garde cinema and archival film aesthetics. Forthcoming: *Harun Farocki. Du cinéma au musée* (2021, P.O.L.).

Dario CECCHI is Assistant Professor of Aesthetics at Sapienza University of Rome. His research focuses on film and media aesthetics, especially documentary and Iranian cinema.

Ilana FELDMAN is a researcher, critic and essayist. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow at ECA-USP. Her research focuses on the modes of production of subjectivity and narrative construction within the scope of contemporary cinema, with an emphasis on the relationship between subjectivity, politics and culture. As a critic and essayist, in addition to academic publications, she has written about cinema, literature and culture for several newspapers and magazines.

David LARocca is the author, editor, or coeditor of a dozen books, including *The Philosophy of War Films* (2014), *The Philosophy of Documentary Film* (2017), and *The Thought of Stanley Cavell and Cinema* (2020). Formerly Harvard's Sinclair Kennedy Fellow in the United Kingdom, and a participant in an NEH Institute, the School of Criticism and Theory, a workshop with Abbas Kiarostami, and Werner Herzog's Rogue Film School, he has held visiting research or teaching positions at Binghamton, Cornell, Cortland, Harvard, Ithaca College, the School of Visual Arts, and Vanderbilt. [www.DavidLaRocca.org](http://www.DavidLaRocca.org)

Volker PANTENBURG is professor for Film Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. He has published widely on essayistic film and video practices, experimental cinema, and contemporary moving image installations.

Nicolás PEREDA is a filmmaker and assistant professor at Berkley/University of California.

Fernão PESSOA RAMOS is Professor at the Multimedia Department and Coordinator of the 'Research Center for Documentary Film' (CEPECIDOC) at UNICAMP (State University of Campinas/Brazil). He is the author of 'Mas afinal... o que é mesmo documentário?' ('After all, what is documentary?').

Raed RAFEI is a Lebanese filmmaker, researcher, and multimedia journalist. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in film and digital Media at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Narimane MARI is a French-Algerian filmmaker and producer.

Filipe MARTINS is film director, professor (ESMAD), researcher (IF-UP) and film curator. He holds a PhD in Communication Sciences (UM) and is a postdoctoral fellow in Philosophy (FLUP).

Catarina MOURÃO studied Music, Law and Film (MA Bristol University). In 1998 she founded AporDOC, Portuguese Documentary Association. Since 2000 she has been teaching Film and Documentary since. With another filmmaker (Catarina Alves Costa) she started Laranja Azul, an independent production company for creative documentary and visual arts in Lisbon.

NGUYEN Trinh Thi is a Hanoi-base independent filmmaker and moving image artist. She is founder and director of Hanoi DOCLAB, an independent center for documentary film and the moving image art in Hanoi since 2009.

Susana de SOUSA DIAS is a filmmaker and professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts/University of Lisbon. She also holds a PhD in aesthetics.

Marie VOIGNIER is an artist and a filmmaker based in Paris.

Phillip WARNELL is an artist, filmmaker and academic, based in London.

Mohanad YAQUBI is co-founder of Idioms Film, a leading production house based in Ramallah, Palestine. He practices film and archival research through Subversive Film, a collective that focuses on militant cinema practices. In 2016, he released his first feature "Off Frame aka Revolution until Victory". He is currently a resident research at CRAMP "Centre of Research on Archival Memory Practices", part of KASK school of the arts, Gent, Belgium.

#### QUESTIONS SENT TO THE PARTICIPANTS:

- When in his text "The Documentary Producer" (1933), John Grierson proposed to define the documentary as a "creative treatment of actuality", he alluded to the two conflicting poles that constitute the genre. On the one hand, documentary films are directly concerned with the social and political reality they address (thus raising the question of what is constitutive of this very reality). On the other hand, they are the fruit of artistic production (thus raising the question of subjective mediation of contemporary reality, and that of the impact of form). How would you address this tension inherent to documentary formats? What is at stake when talking about documentary today?

- Documentary has traditionally been associated with political struggle and emancipatory aims: it gave voice to those people and subjects that have been underrepresented or silenced, and problematized the hegemonic truth claims of reigning institutions. Some of these films are straightforwardly conceived as activist films and intended to actively participate in the struggle in question. Others are political in a subtler sense: they disturb the commonsensical perception of reality and produce, as Jacques Rancière says, dissensus. For such documentaries, the question of form is fundamental, in the sense that rather than claiming to be political through the choice of their topic, they make films politically, as Godard famously puts it. How do you consider the political potential of documentary with relation to form? Is Adorno's understanding of form as "sedimented content" valuable according to you in the context of documentary films?
- Documentaries are both, representations of reality and constitutive of this reality, as they contribute to shaping its perception. Today, they intervene in a reality in which images are omnipresent. At the same time, however, they are more prone to being manipulated or instrumentalized. Moreover, the idea of the factual as a stable, reliable realm has been challenged not only by philosophical interventions (cf. Marxist and critical theory's critique of positivism), but also by the growing proliferation of "fake news", "alternative facts", or conspiracy theories, which pervade the public sphere. In your view, what does this imply for documentary theory and praxis?
- Many contemporary filmmakers and theorists refuse the division between documentary and fiction, and prefer to describe films as hybrid formats or essay films. In fact, filming and editing are seen as inherently creative acts, relying on an intrinsic fictional *puissance*: rather than simply capturing reality, they are considered as means of producing it. How do you understand the work of fiction in relation to documentary? Does such a distinction as the one between fiction and documentary still make sense for you? What about the fictional *constituens* of reality itself?
- The reality addressed by documentary films is always, one way or another, the reality of images, and many contemporary documentary formats reflect upon the nature of images through specific aesthetic devices. Hartmut Bitomsky for example stresses that images are not merely objective material unaffected by the viewing process, but products of the interaction between the visible and the imagination of the director or viewer. Reflecting on different kinds of images – as in films using surveillance footage, different kinds of archival material or found footage, media recording, or private videos – documentary films often recur to existing material and problematize its specific agency. They do so, for instance, by interrupting the constant flow of images and sounds, displacing them from one context into another, making it possible to look at them anew and think of their meaning afresh; or by recurring to estrangement effects. According to you, what kind of critique is facilitated through documentary formats? How do you consider documentary cinema as a tool of memory, which at the same time bears witness to the past and enables its critical reassessment? More generally speaking, how can documentary films subvert, challenge, or expand conceptual thinking about images and aesthetics? Is there a philosophy through filmic means? Which forms would be appropriate to do so?

WHAT IS DOCUMENTARY?  
O QUE É O DOCUMENTÁRIO

I believe all cinema is a “creative treatment of actuality”, as Grierson defines it. When a filmmaker deals with footage, those images are the actuality. No matter how frame and stage were previously organized, images will overcome the filmmaker’s intentionality. To use Roland Barthes’ vocabulary, photographic images, including motion pictures, present both ‘studium’ and ‘punctum’. The difference of motion pictures is that creative work with them requires assemblage or montage. Therefore, cinema is not a creative *act*: it is a creative *treatment* of images. But this is true in all cases, either you realize a fiction or a documentary.

*Dario Cecchi*

The “creative treatment” that Grierson talks about have taken over my own documentaries in unlimited/unpredictable ways. I think, at stake is what balance each filmmaker decides for him/herself, between depicting “the real” / reality/facts / actuality, and how much they get “treated.” For me, this balance fluctuates between different works. Sometimes my “authority” or authorship is more apparent – materials and footages get more “intervened”, are more edited, more “treated”. Sometimes I restrain myself from making too many “treatments,” for example, by using a lot of long shots. I think the art is the balance, and negotiations between these untreated materials of the real and the treatments from the author. However, when I say “untreated materials” it just means “untreated” in a relative way, because every time you have a person behind a camera, you already have a treatment.

*Nguyen Trinh Thi*

As the earliest theorists of “documentary” film were aware, the inherent tension between *objective* and *subjective* is part of what animates the works we are offered. We know how every feature film is, in some genuine sense, a documentary of its own making, that is, until we are faced with computer generated imagery (CGI) and the striking presentations of generative adversarial networks (GANs). We remain sensitive to the “presumptive assertions” (Carroll) of films, which allow and encourage us to take them seriously as testimonies of truth and fact, that is, until we are given “director commentary” (or other input) that upends our faith—the chronology was

changed, the subjects were fed lines, some details were left out, other details were added, and so on.

*David LaRocca*

Em última análise é difícil sustentar que exista uma realidade em cinema independentemente de um ponto de vista que lhe confere sentido. Sabemos que existe sempre uma construção social ligada a essa dita realidade. Ou seja, hoje em dia, os elementos que compõem o documentário complexificaram-se, a realidade que se observa ou filma é já de si uma realidade que contém a sua própria construção e mediação. Na medida em que reduz o documentário a estas duas variáveis, a definição de Grierson é talvez demasiado ingénua ou simplista. Se calhar é impossível arranjar uma definição nova enquanto não se encontrar outro nome para os filmes que partem desta raiz da “actualidade”. A palavra “documentário” parece-me sempre um pouco redutora e pouco inspiradora, na medida em que é demasiado normativa contendo uma hierarquia implícita entre a realidade/documento e o seu autor e parece fechar-nos em vez de nos abrir para novas formas de tratar a realidade.

*Catarina Mourão*

In 1979, in a text on Jean-Pierre Gorin’s film *Poto and Cabengo*, Harun Farocki wrote: “If someone sits at a table with his or her back to the camera, this means ‘fiction film’; if this place is left free, it means: Experiment, presentation.” While Farocki doesn’t explicitly use the word “documentary,” he seems to have this difference in mind; documentary, in his model, would be a different term for “experiment, presentation.”

*Volker Pantenburg*

La première question serait de savoir s’il s’agit vraiment d’un genre quand nous parlons du documentaire. Pour échapper à des conventions pragmatiques, liées aux marchés de l’audiovisuel, on pourrait parler d’une *forme documentaire* au sens d’un style, visant par là un mode qui dépasse le medium du film, une manière de témoigner de quelque chose qui circule, se transforme, se perd et revient, des gestes ou des modes d’exister, comme le dit par exemple Marielle Macé. On juge trop facilement la qualité d’un documentaire du point de vue de ce qu’il « raconte ». Il faudrait davantage saisir ses manières de composer, de structurer et de rythmer les éléments audio-visuels.

*Christa Blümlinger*

For the filmmaker, the question then is whether you stretch the definition of documentary so it includes your work, or just drop it and find other terms that

are a bit more inclusive. I guess I have chosen the latter solution, although none is really satisfying. Because there is just too much to explain when you say “documentary,” because, I think, the perceptions and expectations people normally rely on when they hear “documentary” are quite narrow. I found myself moving further and further away from describing my films as documentary. At the beginning, I used “experimental documentary”, or “experimental film”, then “essay film”, “hybrid essay film”, or sometimes “moving image.” I remember sometimes at festivals, or somewhere else, I’d be reluctant when people ask “What kind of film do you make?” “Documentary, but...” I thought, the next time people ask that question, I’m just going to say: “Good films!”

*Nguyen Trinh Thi*

Documentário, em nosso caso, é um filme (a sua forma). Isto quer dizer que é uma coisa audiovisual disposta em unidade narrativa, transcorrendo numa medida e em direção a um fim futuro (‘The End’), que é seu presente pelo passado, aberto no agora da duração. Nesta medida é finalista, é aquilo que transcorre, pela tomada, para o fim do filme – que é um ponto, uma ‘protensão’ ainda aberta, mas que sabemos fechá-la. Mais ainda (e assim o caracterizando definitivamente) documentário é um filme que asseve sobre o mundo, basicamente em dois modos: num modo proposicional ou num modo estético – muitas vezes sobrepostos entre si. Asserir ‘filmicamente’ não implica, necessariamente, uma proposição audiovisual (embora esta forma intencional seja preponderante na tradição documentária). Constelações estéticas (aquelas trazem a expressão de uma ‘aesthesis’) podem sobrepor-se às proposições audiovisuais em sua intencionalidade, mas sempre trazem, ainda que como um eco ao fundo, a dimensão assertiva as torna documentárias. Distinguimos assim, por exemplo, o documentário estético de um filme experimental-abstrato. Um modo fácil de analisar, ou localizar, documentários, é nos centrarmos nas particularidades de sua mise-en-scène. Jacques Aumont, David Bordwell, Michel Mourlet, desenvolveram trabalhos estimulantes sobre a encenação ficcional. Dziga Vertov e Jean-Louis Comolli, entre outros, debruçaram-se de modo mais decidido sobre as particularidades da mise-en-scène documentária em sua inflexão filmica, como sendo aquilo que, paradoxalmente, a determina a partir da circunstância da tomada.

*Fernão Pessoa Ramos*

It happens that I often work with first feature film directors, and funnily enough, none of them had graduated from conventional film schools. What I noticed that they all have in common is this recurring question of what a film is. At their beginnings, these films are never determined to be either documentary or fiction. For them, as for me, it all starts with an unsettling feeling, a wondering

that keeps returning as a metaphor into stories, images, poems, where actuality stops to be affiliated in any way to an actuality; it rather becomes a segment in a narrative, layered with multiple realities, a complex of possibilities in time. The best part is when the filmmaker realizes they are able to manufacture a reality, to realize their ability of reclaiming images, sounds, and time. Practicing filmmakers continue to remind us that there are no realities in films other than the reality they create in their own films. There are only intensions, motives, and ideologies, and this is a point I will just leave behind as a fact, and ask a more basic question: What is the need to define reality, and where does this obsession to contextualize actuality come from? And why does this inherited obsession find its way into scholarly discussions in western academia and not elsewhere?

*Mohanad Yaqubi*

Pour moi, le cinéma, documentaire ou non, est une forme de réagencement de faits existants, ou de faits inventés, qu'on capture ou qu'on fait jouer ; on les réarrange autrement que la façon dont ils se présentent dans la totalité chaotique du réel ou de l'imagination, on leur donne possiblement un autre sens, une autre forme. C'est une mise en corrélation d'éléments épars, un collage, même dans la forme du plan-séquence. Mais cela peut aussi être un réagencement d'images ou de sons trouvés. Préexistants, non pas dans la continuité du réel, mais dans la réalité qui est celle d'un autre film, d'une archive visuelle ou sonore.

*Marie Voignier*

A movie is a documentary when the creative treatment of images is continued, at least virtually, by the spectator. In other words, the spectator should be incited to consider images as documents that are available for new investigations. Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica applied this principle to their documentary about the fall of the Communist regime in Romania (*Videograms of a Revolution*). They assembled videos of the upheaval against the Romanian dictator Ceausescu. They show the arrest, trial, and execution of him and his wife. These videos were produced by both the State TV channel and independent video makers. The voice-over explains the variations of perspective according to the points of view and presumable political stances of the different operators. But this highly regulative treatment of images aims at training the spectator to be a critical observer and eventually an engaged witness in a world whose actuality is increasingly mediated by media and information. Vilém Flusser theorizes the affinity of imagination and information: they are both a form of *Einbildung*. Flusser's theory influenced Farocki's work, and vice versa. This is what I mean when I say that a documentary is the continuation of the creative treatment of images by the spectator. Vertov imagined films that

produced other films. I would speak of creative treatments of images that produce other creative treatments of images.

*Dario Cecchi*

In writing about the films of Chris Marker, Uriel Orlow likened images to Proustian madeleines because of their power to evoke and trigger the process of memory, and create unforeseen networks of relations. He described viewers and makers of film as agents that merely generate an otherwise independent process of connectivity between images. He wrote: “Rather than solely serving the film’s narrative, the image operates according to its own logic of association that links it to other images, in the same sequence or across the film, effectively becoming a kind of hinge between places, times, and images.”

*Raed Rafei*

En ce sens, le cinéma est une création de la mémoire, une invention de souvenirs, et non une conservation de mémoire. C’est une mémoire active, qui invente, qui construit le souvenir plus qu’il ne le fixe. Il est nécessairement lié à un point de vue, affirmé ou hésitant voire contradictoire ou erroné, mais situé quelque part.

*Marie Voignier*

I see documentary filmmaking as a craft where filmmakers mold and work their stories as if they were pieces of clay. They suture fragmented images together and these fragments end up having a life of their own. They communicate with each other horizontally across the timeline of the film in unexpected and unpredictable ways. What is more is that this horizontal communication is renewed every time the film is screened to different publics. So even though films are made of recorded definitive images, they still have the power to generate “newness” every time they are viewed or screened.

*Raed Rafei*

A história do documentário, de suas inovações estéticas e técnicas, de seus debates críticos e impacto cultural, sempre foi atravessada pela ideia de ficção. No cinema, seja no âmbito da ficção propriamente dita, do documentário ou das produções híbridas (aquelas que jogam com a indeterminação e ambiguidade entre encenação e autenticidade), a verdade só pode existir enquanto efeito de uma série de convenções gramaticais e operações de linguagem, enquanto efeito de um pacto de crença com o espectador. Não é por outra razão que, depois de inventores como Robert Flaherty e John Grierson, Jean Rouch, etnógrafo e documentarista que revolucionou a prática documentária, tornando-se um dos



criadores do cinema moderno com *Eu, um negro* (1958) e *Crônica de um verão* (1960), dizia que “a ficção é o único caminho para se penetrar a realidade” e que “a câmera não deve ser um obstáculo para a expressão dos personagens, mas uma testemunha indispensável que motivará sua expressão”. Para Rouch, assim como para o cinema moderno, nascido no pós-guerra, a câmera teria uma função produtiva, mobilizando realidades e reações das pessoas filmadas que não existiriam sem ela, como uma catalisadora das verdades dos personagens. Como consequência, o momento da filmagem seria não um instante de “representação” do mundo tal qual é, mas o momento de uma singular metamorfose entre quem filma e quem é filmado, embate entre os meios de produção da imagem e os meios de construção da realidade.

*Ilana Feldman*

What is actuality? Is it a circle or is it a square? Is it a moment or a context? Is it what happens in front of your eyes or in a YouTube video? Can we see, for example, *Moana*, as a reflection of Moana’s reality, or Flaherty’s perspective? Also, can we as spectators today, in the year 2021, really strip our eyes and minds of the colonial racial discourse when we find ourselves watching the restored version of *Moana with Sound*, and simply admire the great effort to restore the film and provide it with sound?

If we were to use these questions to look at the history of exploration films, which are somehow considered to be the origin of documentary, then we would see that films such as *Moana*, *Nanook*, *90° South*, *Kon-Tiki*, are intimately linked to the idea of exploring geographies which have not yet been reached by “civilized” humans. Meanwhile, when looking at the political context of the time, we see that a wave of hyper aggressive colonial expansions was spreading around the world, in search of more territory waiting to be claimed. The origins of documentary thus reflect in many ways colonial fantasies, empowered by the scientific and ethnographic rhetoric of the era; fantasies that still dominate the medium, producing histories around it, and keeping film and its industry prisoners in its essence.

*Mohanad Yaqubi*

‘History is a delightful fantasy’ told Marcel Duchamp, as are its documents, texts, events, archives and recordings, which continually spawn a spectacle of a brightly coloured array. Colonial violence is a pre-condition of genre, a subspecies of modernity and its history. This noise afflicts the filmmaker, affirming trading pathways, shipping routes in-person, of missionary or cultural theft. Companies, shooters, corporations and end credits don’t blink at the sight of real tears. See *from the pole to the equator* (Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, 1988) which repurposes how the western eye performs the mutilation of prodigious creatures and trophy hunters.

The institutional rules of docu-grammar, cinematic threshold and structured learning emanate from these abeyances. Ethnography is them studied by us, uncompromised by an ethical filmmaker and release mechanisms. Cinephiles know that non-fiction is a program of both modernist and colonialist technique. Listen to the wilderness, as voiced by those without care. Chantal Akerman saw a truer falsehood, a cusp described in *From the Other Side*. 'It's a total fiction, but it could have been true' (on the film's final monologue). Certainty and belief sustain humanity in a world actually populated by ambiguity, lack of veracity, concern, contestation and precariousness. Afflicted by the temperature of 'collections' and 'investments', film oscillates in a wealthy bubble of feverish antics, where finitude is set alongside a cinematic reality comprised of an impossible search for missing persons. Unassailable, ungraspable unknowns are cast in an algorithmic manner, where nothing can ever be fully identified.

*Phillip Warnell*

Ce que je peux dire c'est que le documentaire est le sol de l'existence  
 où se côtoient les mondes qui forment le monde  
 c'est donc un point de rencontre des visibles  
 Pas dans un - entre-nous - sinon c'est un raté  
 mais dans un entre-mondes qui se crée là  
 dépossédé du déterminant pour accueillir et être accueilli  
 dans le mouvement du récit humain  
 Édouard Glissant parle de la langue Créole : "une langue composite,  
 née de la mise en contact d'éléments linguistiques  
 absolument hétérogènes les uns par rapport aux autres »  
 Entre alors le phénomène de création des connexions  
 qui ne peut se définir que dans le « nouveau », pour chacun de nos films  
 C'est à cet endroit que je travaille pour être débarrassée des questions  
 et suivre la délicieuse sensation procurée par la découverte  
 d'un nouveau paysage perceptible  
 partagé avec une spectatrice dont la vue fragile  
 l'empêche de lire les sous titres  
 mais, qui une fois le film fini à l'écran, dit :  
 « je n'ai pas une assez bonne vue pour lire,  
 mais les couleurs, les voix, les sons, les mouvements,  
 les lumières et la musique m'ont tellement emportés ».  
 Je travaille aujourd'hui au montage d'un film  
 qui a pour titre : On a eu la journée, bonsoir !  
 Un titre transmis à Jean Rouch dans sa rencontre  
 avec le peuple Dogon, qui le prononce sur la place publique,  
 nommant chacun de leurs morts, n'en oubliant aucun  
 jusqu'au buffle qui les a nourri.  
 C'est la réunion intime du cycle des Vivants.

On a eu la journée, bonsoir ! est une traversée d'irruptions déstabilisantes  
dans le vivant visible et invisible.

C'est le geste qui mène au voyage de l'amour de l'autre.

C'est un gros travail sur lequel je me concentre, avec l'autre's.

*Narimane Mari*

POLITICS OF PERCEPTION  
POLÍTICAS DA PERCEPÇÃO

On dit parfois d'un certain cinéma documentaire qu'il « donne la parole à ». Je ne crois pas qu'un film même militant « donne » la parole à qui que ce soit. La parole est toujours prise en charge et détenue par le ou la cinéaste. Le ou la cinéaste (ou un collectif de cinéastes) peut faire partie d'un groupe discriminé, opprimé, en lutte, et donc s'exprimer depuis le cœur de cette lutte. Ou bien : le ou la cinéaste peut faire sienne la parole d'un groupe opprimé / en lutte et en relayer des parties choisies par lui ou elle. Il-elle ne donne pas la parole, mais la prend, la sélectionne. Et cela implique d'immenses précautions et responsabilités. Le ou la cinéaste fabrique dans un film la représentation de son point de vue à partir de la parole ou des images des autres, et c'est en cela qu'il ou elle peut ajouter une participation politique à une lutte, une histoire, un débat.

*Marie Voignier*

In a way, representing a community, a cause, a struggle, is an indication of affection, of holding responsibility toward an experience. The line between propaganda and film is really thin, it is a matter of the way how a critic can be presented within an image while being in solidarity, looking for the imperfects as an act of solidarity. Any film is a political statement, with or without the filmmaker's intention. The illusion of a depoliticized, objective cinema is simply related to how much the filmmaker is aware of the political and social contexts, and this won't prevent the spectators from recognizing the political stance. Thinking of the term, "imperfect cinema," is perhaps key to watching/analyzing film. Embedded in the form (and not the content) the filmmaker chooses, this conscious approach to the imperfect medium as a metaphor of the deflected reality it represents allows for a space of dialogue and interpretation with its audience. This is when audience becomes part of the process, and when the filmmaker becomes the spectator.

*Mohanad Yaqubi*

Il y a toujours avec le cinéma de fiction ou documentaire une instrumentalisation des images qui en soi n'est ni positive ni négative, c'est un outil, qui a cette puissance perverse de pouvoir activer notre croyance en lui et parfois à notre insu provoquer notre adhésion, notre projection. La puissance de cette réinvention/recomposition de la réalité peut servir plusieurs objectifs :

contester la réalité effective plutôt que la reproduire, fabriquer des contre-récits pour émanciper, discriminer, dénoncer, divertir ou faire histoire : si l'on prend pour exemple les films complotistes actuels, les pires/meilleurs films de propagande qu'ils soient fascistes ou révolutionnaires, ce sont des productions filmiques qui visent à « changer le monde », ou à « réveiller les consciences », et qui utilisent cette puissance d'invention et d'agencement des faits réels ou inventés pour créer un sens nouveau, « révéler » quelque chose du monde qui ne s'y trouve peut-être pas. Je suis très méfiante avec cet objectif-là du cinéma (souvent du côté de ce que l'on nomme cinéma documentaire) : faire un film pour « rendre visible ». C'est la plus mauvaise raison de faire un film. Tout le cinéma se construit sur un jeu de cache-cache, sur une ombre plutôt que sur une visibilisation. C'est pourquoi je suis dans l'incapacité de tracer une ligne nette autour du cinéma documentaire. D'un côté il n'y a pas vraiment de distinction radicale suffisante avec le cinéma de fiction, on le dit depuis longtemps, et de l'autre côté, le glissement vers le cinéma de propagande et le reportage d'actualité est évident et ne doit pas être considéré comme une dégradation d'une forme de pureté d'intentions du documentaire. Je ne me satisfais pas d'une distinction entre un cinéma documentaire « du bon côté » contre un cinéma de reportage ou de télévision intellectuellement/esthétiquement pauvre ou alors fascisant. Le cynisme ou l'hypocrisie que peuvent prendre la position de cinéastes documentaires est selon moi souvent bien plus scandaleux que la littéralité ou partialité d'un mauvais reportage.

*Marie Voignier*

Aquilo que me interessa em documentário é precisamente a procura de uma forma que se ajuste e que potencie a história que eu quero contar. E aqui reside para mim a dimensão verdadeiramente política do documentário, a questão do ponto de vista traduzida e reinventada na sua forma. De certa forma para mim o conteúdo separadamente da sua forma não existe. A partir do momento que quero contar uma história que tem as suas raízes no “real” o desafio é sempre como é que a vou contar, qual a forma justa para contar essa história, e o pensamento que quero gerar no espectador. Nesse processo de encontrar a forma, a própria história vai-se construindo e reinventando.

*Catarina Mourão*

Considero que o entendimento de Adorno de forma como "conteúdo sedimentado" é extremamente válido no contexto do documentário. Quanto a mim, a dicotomia entre forma e conteúdo é falaciosa. Não só porque tradicionalmente implica uma hierarquização — do conteúdo sobre a forma, da palavra sobre a matéria, dos sistemas verbais sobre os não verbais —, como esconde o papel que a forma tem na criação e sentido do próprio conteúdo e de

como ela pode ser um reflexo de concepções hegemónicas do mundo. Em termos políticos, este aspecto é de grande relevância. Aliás, percebi isto através da minha própria práxis, quando fiz um documentário em 2000, sobre um processo-crime instruído pela PIDE nos anos 50 que levou duas mulheres à prisão. O filme não só secundarizou as imagens de arquivo em relação às palavras, como as subsumiu a uma narrativa teleológica, perpetuando, sem eu ter disso consciência, uma visão da história de matriz positivista, totalmente decifrável e sem lacunas. Foi após esse filme que empreendi uma reflexão profunda sobre documentário, história e arquivo consciencializando algo que se tornou central nos meus filmes: que a forma *forma* o conteúdo. Considero que fazer cinema politicamente implica criar uma "forma que pensa", para utilizar a expressão de Godard, que também diz que no mau cinema é o "pensamento que forma". Por vezes, sucede não acontecer nem uma coisa nem outra. Surpreendo-me sempre que vejo documentários que abordam diretamente situações políticas — alguns cujas filmagens, inclusive, implicaram riscos — e que são, paradoxalmente, totalmente despolitizados. Para mim é muito importante encontrar aquilo que designo por *forma justa*, uma forma que deve estar intrinsecamente ligada às matérias sobre as quais se está a trabalhar e ser encontrada a cada novo documentário; uma forma não sujeita a modelos pré-estabelecidos ou já testados, e que, precisamente pela sua singularidade, permite expor algo de novo, residindo aí o seu potencial político.

*Susana de Sousa Dias*

One way of looking at the political and emancipatory potential of film form is to think of a politics of contestation with prevailing cinematic norms. Thus, as alluded to in the prompt, there is no need to have outright “political content” in some traditional sense (e.g., as activist, as proffering scenes of justice delivered or justice denied) in order to see the film as making claims to change what passes for the language of cinema. One instance that remains salient: RaMell Ross’ *Hale County This Morning This Evening* (2018), a work that regularly creates an overlap of fiction and nonfiction, of familiar human moments and estranging visuality, of recognizable grammar and an avant-garde interruption to the demotic. Ross’ film seems emblematic of the contemporary “political potential of documentary”—where a cameraperson is present with the world she encounters, and the subsequent film (made from those sounds and images) allows cinematic revelations to land upon audiences fully-formed and alive. Given that popular or mainstream cinema occupies a fairly narrow bandwidth of formal expression, it can seem that any work that broadens and deepens its scope undertakes a political act, whether it is Gene Kelly’s adaptation of the experimentalism he saw in the 1940s and 50s for his (and Stanley Donen’s) *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952) or Derek Cianfrance’s contact with the tradition of Stan Brakhage, Phil Solomon, and the legacies of the Binghamton Cinema Department, in his *Blue Valentine* (2010). As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote,

“only as far as [people] are unsettled is there any hope for them,” so we can think of Adorno’s form as “sedimented content” as an invitation to become, indeed to continually be, unsettled. Yet why call such unsettling acts “political,” why not merely artistic or creative? Because the comforts of familiarity so offer conspire to constrain and defeat just such artistry and creativity. Thus, we could say that in unsettling our inheritances we encounter the political dimensions of form itself (whatever the art).

*David LaRocca*

Nous connaissons la critique fondamentale qu’Adorno adressait aux médias, dont le cinéma. Mais on peut penser le cinéma avec Adorno, contre Adorno, comme l’a montré Alexander Kluge et par ses propos sur l’espace public, son mode de production innovant, imposé à la télévision privée et par ses films mêmes. Ou encore Gertrud Koch, en transférant ses approches musico-philosophiques et esthétiques vers le cinéma. Ceci dit, l’idée du « contenu sédimenté » se réfère chez Adorno aux formes persistantes en musique et à une esthétique négative. On ne peut pas « appliquer » une telle idée à un art figuratif et mimétique, sans considérer d’abord ce que cette transposition implique. Si on veut penser le cinéma avec Adorno, on peut aussi retenir sa fameuse prise en considération de l’essai qui doit beaucoup à Max Bense et qui permet de souligner la fonction de la forme dans la pensée.

*Christa Blümlinger*

When I worked with my sister, Rania Rafei, on writing and directing *74 (The Reconstitution of a Struggle)* (2012), a film that recounts the occupation of the American University of Beirut in 1974 as a crucial era of mass social justice movements in Lebanon, we were not concerned with the “facts” of what exactly happened. History with a capital H is slippery and impossible to discern with all its facets. Particularly in Lebanon, history is a contested territory because it challenges different and clashing imaginaries of the nation state.

In practice, to allow for the magic of the revolutionary years of the 1970s to permeate our film, we had to move away from fixed truths and facts and create an experimental, permeable environment of remembrance. And by that, I mean an environment open to improvisation and chance. Rather than asking questions to former students who took part in the university’s occupation to remember what happened as it is done classically in a documentary about a certain incident, we worked with young political activists to re-enact the events of the occupation.

What we were after was an active and embodied engagement with the revolutionary spirit of that era. The film became the product of a collaboration with those activists, each one of them engaging with us and with others in the film by bringing in a mixture of their knowledge about that socially and

politically active era of the 70s (from books, archival documents, and conversations with people who had witnessed it) but also their doubts, hesitations, excitement, desires, aspirations, fears etc. The film was precisely troubling because it sought to destabilize notions of linear time and that the past is a sealed moment that admits one truth, or one reading, or one interpretation. We wanted to explore how the past leaks into the present and how the present as a moment always carries residues from both the past and the future. This felt especially true back when we were working on the film in 2011, when the entire Arab region was living an incredible moment of upheavals and hope and change. Suddenly, it felt that the ideals of the 1970s were seeping through the air again! We truly believed that spirits, ideas and affects are not immobilized on a rigid timeline, but actually travel through time and space.

The form of the film was certainly by itself our main political statement. The film was inspired by Peter Watkin's hybrid model of re-enactment that he used in *The Commune* and *Punishment Park*, and other films. Resistance to power structures are recurrent moments in history. Learning about movements of resistance through forms of documentary that are truly participatory is powerful because it allows for ideas and practices of resistance to oppressive institutions to get connected across spaces and times.

*Raed Rafei*

A political filmmaker will use what is available to deliver, be it photographs, newspapers, animation, advertisement, whatever it takes. This intervention is disturbing the norms of film industry and its commercial aspects, and that includes images immigrating from one film to another. The fluidity of images and realities is manifested through the process of editing, and writing. Making films politically is a statement against forms assigned by the markets and film schools; it is to reclaim freedom for the medium. Deciding to reside the cinematic tools for a struggle goes alongside the acceptance to analyze the film and the artist through the same factors that shade people's memory –be it a still image from a film, or a line from an interview, or a smile of a young freedom fighter. It is transferable, it is framed, and it refers to everyone. Maybe this is something overrated and obvious, but we are witnessing the pollution of generations of filmmakers through their education, which is reaching a close end. There is a need to open the film school pedagogies to include more dialectical thinking methodologies not only in filmmaking, but also in developing awareness towards the arts as a reflection of the collective consciousness of its society. This “practice” of thinking does not focus on funding or quality, it works with what is available and harnesses intellectual capacities into a message, with a clear and mature use of the medium and the tools that deliver the messages.

I am returning here a passage from Mustafa Abu Ali's memoir about his time as a film student in London. “It took me ten years to forget what I learned in the



film school. There was the need to tell the story of the people by the language of the people, and not by the film education, a medium developed by our colonizers.” This awareness of looking for a language that has not been taught, that can be elaborated only after forgetting what has been learned, is what makes the medium accessible. It took me ten years to understand what this means in practice, and having been operating between the practice of filmmaking and film education, I felt an urgency to start forming new and other canons, to lead the filmmakers back to the society, not to the industry.

*Mohanad Yaqubi*

A política da representação documentária traz essencialmente a dimensão da ação, a dimensão da práxis. Assim, ela pode, ou não, ser carregada no modo estético. Nos grandes modos documentários (Bill Nichols intuiu, de modo pioneiro, estas modalidades) a *mise-en-scène* da ação é aquela do Cinema Verdade (mas não a da ‘mosca’ retraída na parede do Cinema Direto): é aquela em que o cineasta intervém com sua performance no mundo e, na intersubjetividade pelo sujeito-da-câmera e com o sujeito-em-cena, figura o embate com a realidade social, na tomada. Ela, tomada, aparece então aberta para o indeterminado e para o imponderável, deixando de lado as amarras da decupagem e do roteiro. Para muitos, o documentário deve ser definido neste espaço, o da existência engajada pelo filme na tomada ‘direta’. O engajamento é o que justifica a presença na encenação como liberdade da existência, em sua previsão filmica.

Já a expressão estética audiovisual documentária é perceptiva, se quiserem, mas vai além disto. Como é sensorial, em seu modo pleno, torna-se também háptica, no sentido do encontro do corpo com aquilo que lhe transcende e naquilo que a câmera, como mundo, crê conseguir colar-se – pois sempre reflexo e automatismo. Tocar seria lançar nosso corpo (agora um imenso e quase infinito corpo, sem órgãos, sem imagem) desafiando a medida transcendental dos sentidos. E assim, qual seria a medida do toque que desafia a subjetividade?

Há certamente uma dimensão política no desafio do corpo que afirma a si no ‘tocar’. E, mais ainda, quando assim se coloca chocando-se ao biopoder que o restringe, para afirmar-se em potência. Se nos fixarmos a seu sentido mais estreito, aquele do engajamento existencial, política que se faz no campo da práxis, mas nela não é delimitada, pois foge ao campo da ação-reação e da medida pelo esquema sensorio motor. Para um novo sujeito pede-se uma nova medida e um corpo liberado: aquele capaz de tocar.

*Fernão Pessoa Ramos*

If you assume, as I do, that the primary object of aesthetics is not art, but perception, which is aesthesis for the Greeks, then the label ‘politics of perception’ is identical with ‘politics of aesthetics’. In “The Work of Art in the

Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin argues that the history of art is the history of how perception changes according to social or technological transformations. I believe Rancière would agree with him—although he disagrees with him about other formulations of that essay, such as ‘aestheticization of politics’. Rancière’s concept of ‘partage du sensible’ is at the same time political and aesthetic. He thinks that the constitution of political power, what he calls ‘police,’ depends on the introduction of an a priori principle that distributes different perceptual modes, and consequently different levels of experience, to groups and individuals. Police thus establishes an order within society.

I believe cinema does not replace this aesthetic-political device: its functioning is overruled, not deactivated. In the *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, Esfir Shub used only archive materials. These materials were mainly a document of the Czarist propaganda, she reused for instance the footage of the celebration in Moscow for the three hundred years of the dynasty. But she changes the sense of the Czarist propaganda, which aimed to worship the almightiness of the empire. In her documentary, you see instead how an oppressive Leviathan destroys itself when pushed to war by a capitalist economy based on profit and appropriation. The aesthetics behind those images is not eliminated, it is assumed in a dialectical perspective. Shub judges the outburst of the revolution according to the progressive delegitimizing of the ancient rule. In this way, she unveils the peculiar ‘de-figurative’ power of documentary, which is the counterpart of the critical stance this kind of cinema claims for the spectator.

*Dario Cecchi*

En ce qui concerne Jacques Rancière et sa définition romantique du régime esthétique de l’art, celle-ci peut se référer au cinéma parmi d’autres arts. Si Rancière a lui-même montré comment on peut par exemple lire les films de Straub-Huillet ou de Costa à partir d’une idée de l’émancipation qui place le *dissensus* au centre, il associe par ailleurs cette idée à la notion de fiction. Nous pouvons de ce point de vue nous rappeler également les concepts des « puissances du faux » ou du « cri » chez Gilles Deleuze, repérés justement à partir d’une classification de formes hybrides, incluant des modes spécifiques de fabulation ou témoignant d’une capacité de résistance. S’il est difficile de définir le documentaire à partir de ces approches et idées, on peut en retenir des lignes esthétiques et des propositions éthiques, concernant par exemple la distribution du temps, du regard et de la pluralité des voix.

*Christa Blümlinger*

Aí estaria a dimensão política e dissensual da forma-cinema, compreendo o cinema na esteira das contribuições de um autor como Jacques Rancière: não como um conjunto de representações inteligíveis e consensuais da realidade,

mas como uma nova partilha e reconfiguração do sensível, pois, se a política opera esteticamente, os afetos gerados pelo cinema operariam politicamente. Sendo assim, o cinema documentário não é simplesmente um conjunto de imagens e sons comprometidos com uma ideia factual de verdade, uma reunião de representações visuais e sonoras da realidade, mas um agente cognitivo e sensível, um operador, potencialmente transformador, da própria realidade. É por isso que, sem dúvida, o documentário, campo de forças plurais e práticas distintas, com toda a sua instabilidade, deslizamento e indeterminação enquanto gênero específico, institui um espaço comum de visibilidade, experiência e de pensamento. Nesse sentido, não apenas existe a possibilidade de uma filosofia através de meios cinematográficos como ela precisa ser reinventada, singularmente, no corpo a corpo entre cada obra e as leituras críticas que dela se podem fazer. Uma filosofia por meio do cinema tem de ser assim não apenas uma filosofia do movimento, mas uma filosofia em movimento.

*Ilana Feldman*

TRUSTING IMAGES  
CRENÇA NAS IMAGENS

I think that the present moment requires us to rethink the boundaries of what a documentary is. Any person has the ability with a mobile phone and an internet to capture and stream potentially to millions of viewers images of a certain event or moment. They can further comment on the reality they capture and frame it in a certain way. They can also easily link it with other images and other realities. How do such actions compare to a documentary film? Where do we draw boundaries?

*Raed Rafei*

I always keep thinking of the surveillance camera video file that is replaced every 48 hours with a new file, and the millions of hours that are being documented every day, while billions of frames are being erased at the same time. This mp4 file is only saved if there was an event: an accident, a complaint. This one lucky file suddenly becomes a reference to reality, keeping in mind that this salvation from erasure is based on suspicion, on something that has happened in a frame of that video file; an interruption in real time that required saving the file from the bottomless void. And so the file comes as an indication, a fragment of an investigation, a reference in a research, and in this case, we trust the image.

Early visual depiction of the Orient, in both painting and photography, captured ancient monuments and cultures; sketching up an imaginary full of mysticism, chaos and strangeness, with the images of Bedouins, camels, desserts, and ruins. For the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and America, these were the only references. When the worshipers, who were used to seeing Jan Van Eyck's depiction of the Orient in his Altarpiece at the St Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, were suddenly able to witness the Orient through photographs, the role of science as the absolute seemed to be confirmed. Images were considered to be reflecting truth, a certain truth which is not that which appears in the frame itself, but a truth existing in the imagination of the photographers and their audience. Do we trust images in this case, aren't all images an illustration of the imaginary rather than a depiction of reality?

When revisiting the discussions held during the 1920's around sound and film, it is astonishing to see the extent of awareness about the distance between the image and reality - I specifically think of here Sergei Eisenstein's manifesto on film sound which he wrote with Vsevolod Pudovkin and Grigori Aleksandrov

in 1928. In their manifesto, the three argue that making sound coincide with the images threatens the process of “neutralizing” the image. It restores the power and autonomy to the photographed object, and limits the ability of an editor to deal with the image as a block, which would create a meaning with other blocks of images (in other words, a film). It is striking to think of images as such disconnected elements employed to form a discourse, a discourse which is not related to the content of the image, but to the death of the image, which only then can be used in a film.

This trust in the image can also be traced back to the memorial portraiture of family members that have passed away. The dead would be dressed in their best clothing and positioned in a frame for a final photograph that will hang for a longtime in their family’s home, as an evidence of death, and as a proof of the past. In a way, this is a testament to the mechanical abilities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century man to capture the truth; a sign of trust in this medium as a source of facticity.

*Mohanad Yaqubi*

The crisis of mimesis stretches back to Plato and before him. Writing itself was thought a scandal to the power of memory. Storytelling—especially fanciful fictions—was a threat to integrity. Perhaps we should admit, then, that art and moral panic are perpetual companions. That said, the one difference is the asymptotic acceleration of technological change. If we have had a couple millennia to get our minds around the potential (and perils) of the written word (along with the effects of the printing press), the scale of development for digital media is on another scale altogether. From Woody Allen’s playful photo compositing in *Zelig* (1983) to the synthetic audiovisual creations of today fewer than forty years have elapsed. Yet, a quick dip into the dirty pool of California politics of the 1930s will show that moviemakers—way back when—were trading on their power to fabricate fictions from facts, as with the Hollywood-backed propaganda that successfully sunk the gubernatorial hopes of novelist Upton Sinclair. As Sinclair stirred the state to imagine an end to poverty, his talented filmmaking adversaries (including Irving Thalberg) unleashed a heap of fake newsreels to scare the public from his morally sound mission. Nearly a century later, as the internet spawns untold thousands of such fakes per second, we are still very far from any such thing as reliable content moderation. Indeed, U.S. Code Title 47, section 230, protects platforms from being held liable for hosting dubious, dangerous, or otherwise damaging content.

*David LaRocca*

Acreditar numa imagem significa acreditar que ela encontra algo, significa acreditar na interpretação. Mas, como sabemos, há uma hermenêutica que desconfia da interpretação. É aquela que descreve modalidades de um encontro

que se afirma na negação da interpretação. Neste caso, a verdade estaria no encontro e não na exegese, compondo no mesmo fôlego, como essência, a pergunta e a compreensão que a dirige. Traçar um panorama aqui pode nos ajudar. Fica mais fácil apreender o que é acreditar numa, ainda que não seja seu pensamento definitivo que se busca. Temos o documentário clássico, aquele que Grierson teorizou tão bem, que acredita saber as imagens; o moderno que se dedica à ação ou a nega pelo recuo no mundo; e o pós-moderno que se debate em torno dos dilemas que a desconstrução do sujeito provoca. Assim abre-se uma porta, um portal, no qual se vislumbra uma tradição fílmica, audiovisual: a tradição documentária.

A mentira seria, então, uma das modalidades da crença na ação. Acreditar em nós, ou em nossa visão da crença, inaugura necessariamente uma intervenção, uma afirmação. Crença seria o que encontramos no espaço da afirmação e do poder, constructo que cobre sua genealogia.

*Fernão Pessoa Ramos*

Culprits, outlaws and stolen goods are a necessity in vicarious living. As Michel Serres put it, victims are a substitute for a non-original. I adventure to the edges of my sensibility, in which I taste only uncertainty and ambiguity. In the infinite mix of the unknowable, however, I am rewarded. The screen always replaces the indescribable with an ‘eminent’ equivalence for it, according to Jean-Charles Masséta. In discord, dissonance and compelling lost voices migrate in absentia, like a scream of souls heard only through the ages. Tune into the plurality of their truths and customs. A failed audition speaks only once it is properly forgotten, having evolved into a space of absence (which might then be reignited elsewhere); or as in-existent, incorporeal anatomy, which can then be touched (or not touched), or felt. Any or all of us sense slow conditions, as per that of background intelligence and things, in which the absent question posed by the nature documentary format is disputed in answer: “please speak to me, you who once upon a time influenced me to speak.”

*Phillip Warnell*

In *Milestones* (1975, dir: Robert Kramer and John Douglas), we get to spent 200 minutes with people from the leftist movement a few years after 1968. They are dispersed over the country, a bit lost, and try to make sense of their lives, coming up with livable models of existence. One of them is Helen, an activist filmmaker finishing a film on the Vietnam war. We meet her in the editing room, looking at her footage on the Steenbeck table. However, the footage looks strangely familiar: it is material from *Peoples’ War* (1969) that Douglas, Kramer and Norm Fruchter shot in North Vietnam in 1969 for the Newsreel collective. How should we make sense of this? Did Kramer and Douglas fool us? I guess so. We might feel all the more betrayed because “Helen” is not

Helen, but played by Grace Paley (just like the others are “playing roles,” even if they sometimes keep their names). Has the material suddenly become “fictional” because it is attributed to a person that it does not belong to? I don’t think so. Kramer and Douglas (who is the cameraman and also plays a blind ceramicist) have worked with reality. They have teased something out of it by travelling, speaking with people, accumulating experience to then condense into stories. They have used what they saw and heard, and since their own past (including *Peoples’ War*) essentially belongs to this history, it has become one element in it. This stretches our understanding of documentary; it is quite far from the notion of “direct cinema.” And yet it also feels “right” to me, like an adequate and “just” rendering of these people in the early 1970s.

And at the same time, I cannot reproach anyone from feeling fooled.

*Volker Pantenburg*

Today philosophers, especially the once called ‘continental’ philosophers, reflect intensively upon the fact that images and imagination may both deceive and enhance trust: I think of Paul Ricoeur for instance. With regard to cinema, Pietro Montani argues that the trust of images should be considered for the process of ‘validation’ (‘autenticazione’) of actuality, rather than for their intrinsic authenticity. I believe this issue needs to be reconsidered according to four phenomena: a) the rise of post-ideological politics, b) the increase of a certain rhetoric of affect in public speech, c) the spread of social media and the emergence of the so-called influencers, d) the revival of the epic, especially in series but also in cinema. These four factors do not only concern ‘alternative facts,’ bullshit, and fake news, but also a series of other phenomena we usually refer to as sovereignism and populism. Liberal politicians have also exploited the rhetoric of affects in the last years. From this point of view the slogans, ‘Yes we can,’ and ‘Make America great again,’ highlight the same conception of ‘thrilling politics.’

As far as images are concerned, trust concerns more a process of working through, in the sense of Freud’s *Durcharbeitung*, than authenticity. Therefore, it claims for revitalizing forms of catharsis, but with an important difference with regard to Aristotle’s very concept. Ancient tragedy enjoyed a preexisting heritage of myths, from which the poets borrowed the stories they put on stage. The public’s attention was focused on pathos: we could also say that the real object of tragedy was a certain ‘distribution of affect’. The public assimilated this distribution, and were thus ‘purified’ from pity and fear. Myths empowered this process, which was indeed a working through. But myths succeeded in it because they were known to all. In a sense, they provided the spectators’ minds with the reproduction of a scene deeply rooted in their memory. We witness today that an outburst of affect creates new myths. In that sense, Obama and Trump are the same, as much as Matteo Salvini (‘il Capitano’) and Carola Rackete (‘la Capitana’)—I am referring to a dispute occurred in Italy last year.

On the contrary, if we care for youth's political conscience, also considering that our public sphere is essentially made of images, then we should try to imagine a new sort of *Verfremdungseffekt*. The image of Aylan Kurdi dead on the seashore while his family was trying to escape from civil war in Syria made him a sort of hero, and probably provoked a change in Angela Merkel's political agenda, but it did not affect the European political conscience in depth. Some days ago a video was released by the Italian TV news. The video shows a woman who lost her baby while on a boat in the Mediterranean Sea, waiting to be saved. That baby will remain nameless and deedless: he was only victim, not a hero. We should make the effort of understanding that this could be anybody's tragedy, although the political debate will polarize this story, like all similar stories, in a representation of heroes and antiheroes, friends and enemies. Furthermore, we have a sort of natural inclination to the 'apotheosis' of victims. It is at least as old as the rise of Christianity, where martyrs were called the 'champions of Christ' (*athletae Christi*). Some similar background could likely be discovered behind the spread of Islamist terrorists who believe to be martyrs. Iñárritu probably aimed to deconstruct this logic with the installation *Carne y arena*, in which the visitor performs the experience of being the victim like everybody else in the same situation.

I have just seen a video produced by the German government, in which youth are called to be 'COVID heroes'. An old man recalls Winter 2020, when he was a carefree 22-years-old student of medicine, who was suddenly obliged to become a hero of the pandemic. Interestingly, the video introduces an ironical element: staying at home is the young man's only act of heroism, watching series on the sofa, drinking beer, and waiting for the runner who brings him pizza. It is a small symptom, yet it is important that we start deconstructing this culture of heroism and hyper-affectivity. Of course, cinema could bring the elaboration of this U-turn much further.

*Dario Cecchi*

Images are not evidence of reality; they are symptoms of the imaginary of this reality. Trusting images is just a mechanism of reclaiming the reality they produce. An image of an empty landscape of the holy land made it reclaimable by the Zionist movement. Images and films about vast wilderness, wildlife, islands, made them evidence of a possible territory to be exploited. This is what happens when the image becomes scientific (especially aerial photography), used for marking territories, opening roads, installing signs with new names replacing the indigenous ones, creating an illusion of a reality for the sake of colonial claim over the land. Film, furthermore, provide these ambitions with the ability to capture time as well, to construct a narrative, claimed as the only evidence of history. To have trust in images is to have trust in their ability to expose the mental and ideological motives behind it. If the image is a tool for the colonial project, it is also a tool for the decolonial project, using the same



images, re-labeling them, creating new inventories for them, attaching them to other histories, stories, and people. Take for example *The Seekers*, a boring and over the top racist film. When this romantic musical set in a newly discovered land with a tribal background was restored and made available in the New Zealand film archive, it suddenly became a very popular movie among the indigenous communities: the Maoris found an archive of their own culture in the film. They recognized an aunt, a father, a location, and spent time laughing, talking, and drinking while watching the film, without paying attention to the film plot itself. These blocks, as Eisenstein describes, neutral and objective, are what the Maoris are seeing: not the colonial mental image, not the montage, but what is actually in the image.

*Mohanad Yaqubi*

Em um momento em que, mais do que nunca, a exigência da performance converte-se em um imperativo imanente ao corpo social (contexto no qual, diria o crítico francês Jean-Louis Comolli, a mise en scène se torna um fato social, “talvez o fato social principal”) e o valor de verdade da imagem torna-se o grande território de disputa contemporânea (haja visto a negação de verdades científicas e históricas, a proliferação de *fake news*, vídeos *deep fakes*, fatos alternativos e a manipulação política das imagens), a forma-documentário nos leva a pensar: o que vemos nas telas? Verdade, manipulação, realidade, ficção ou tudo ao mesmo tempo? Questões que, de acordo com Comolli, pertenciam apenas ao cinema, mas, no contexto do regime do espetáculo generalizado em que vivemos (em que as relações sociais são mediadas por imagens), se transformaram em questões que dizem respeito a todos nós. Sendo assim, diante da onipresença da imagem, alcançar ou se aproximar da verdade dá imenso trabalho e requer disposição: é preciso investigá-la, suportá-la e sustentá-la por meio de um estilo, de uma forma que cada cineasta precisa construir para si, bem como de um trabalho de desmontagem, remontagem e avaliação crítica da natureza da própria imagem – como dedicou-se a fazer, de maneira tão precisa quanto obstinada, o cineasta-ensaísta alemão Harun Farocki. De todo modo, a questão seria saber: por que ainda hoje associamos a imagem à verdade? Por que ainda hoje acreditamos no que vemos? Já não chegou a hora de nos darmos conta de que a máxima de São Tomé, “ver para crer”, atualmente, nesse cenário de “pós-verdades”, transformou-se em “crer para ver”?

*Ilana Feldman*

It is not hyperbole to say that at present, and therefore especially in the near-and-far-term, we should be prepared to doubt the validity of any image or sound we encounter. We are facing what may become a pandemic of “deep skepticism” to match the hyper-charged unreliability of the audiovisual environment. While we have been coming in and out of the uncanny valley for

a couple decades, our emergence on the other side appears, if not already accomplished, then certainly imminent. Generative adversarial networks will create a sea of sounds and images—especially of humans—that will easily trick the human mind and lead it down pathways of trust and therefore folly. If the rise of the Internet has gone hand-in-hand with the rise of digital tricksterism and fraud, then a new universe of such deceptions looms. We may, in fact, be fooled by images of “ourselves”—was I there? Is that really me?

*David LaRocca*

I think the growing proliferation of “fake news” and the like shifts the focus from ontological questions to ethical ones. In medical research (genetics, for instance), there are many things that are possible, but we quite simply should not make use of them since we cannot responsibly estimate their consequences. Similar ethical limits should apply in realms like AI or “deep fakes.” It may well be possible to create a fake moving image document showing Marilyn Monroe and JFK in an intimate moment behind the scenes, but what would it be good for? Those who are capable to fake this, should resist. Forgery and fake news have always been in the world, but the quantitative leaps and their speed of distribution raise the stakes. The question is how to regulate this. The production and dissemination of images will always be quicker than their regulation. It’s like trying to push toothpaste back into the tube.

*Volker Pantenburg*

Les débats sur la relation entre le cinéma et le réel se déplacent aujourd’hui en effet sur le terrain du *fake*, voir sur le *deepfake*, souvent loin des questions esthétiques, éthiques et anthropologiques concernant le documentaire et proposées par les cinéastes eux-mêmes. Il ne faut pas confondre les débats sur les médias et leur dialectique interne avec la question de l’activité des images documentaires. On peut certes observer d’un côté, une vision apocalyptique dans la tradition de la théorie critique, fustigeant l’hégémonie des capitaux régissant les nouveaux médias et de l’autre une position utopique cherchant dans les nouvelles technologies une sorte de possibilité de salut. Mais ce débat ne concerne pas ou rarement les formes singulières des documentaires. Les techniques n’existent que par la manière dont on s’en sert, dont on les rend opératoires. Le documentaire peut inventer des formes de subversion et il peut manifester une activité ou agentivité dans le domaine de l’art de l’image, tout en s’intéressant par exemple à la fonction de l’image comme preuve ou comme trace mémorielle. Aujourd’hui, c’est dans le contexte des projets collaboratifs et transdisciplinaires qu’il trouve une nouvelle place, ce qui ne veut pas dire que le cinéma cesse par ailleurs de fournir une expérience singulière et irremplaçable. Mais parfois, on y confère à un film ou à une vidéo une vocation purement opératoire, comme dans le cadre de projets pluri-disciplinaires de

recherche-action animée par le groupe *Forensic Architecture*, avec ses frises temporelles et ses tableaux infographiques, qui expose également ses recherches et traçages de faits par des vidéos : dans le cas des installations d'Eyal Weizman, je ne parlerais pas de forme ou de film documentaire, mais de support documentaire. Intégrant une articulation artistique multiforme, ce type d'image fonctionnelle peut en revanche faire partie d'une œuvre. Parfois, on recherche dans un tel cadre de recherche-action des formes poétiques, plus proches des traditions du cinéma, comme on peut le voir dans les projets engagés de la plate-forme européenne *Future Architecture* (le film récent *An English Garden* de Will Jennings en est un bon exemple : il fait preuve d'une autonomie esthétique tout en faisant partie d'un dialogue urbanistique plus large).

*Christa Blümlinger*

As we enter a new phase of mimesis and the hyperfake, it may be worth asking what the technologies can do for the good. If we are to contend with the deceptions that may lead us astray, what can be said for the deceptions that can illuminate? As film artists, such as Rithy Panh, have shown us: documentaries can be made with clay and collage, with found footage and painted emulsions. As something of a challenge to the documentarians among us: what about a documentary where the profilmic event is in the past (and thus “unfilmable” according to the prevailing logic of image/sound capture)? Can we *animate* our way to a film of presumptive assertion? If, as Lev Manovich has counseled, the digital is in fact a species of painting, then we are turned back upon the history of representation in a lovely moment of reflexivity. After all, as a species we have spent more time with paintings than films, so what can we say about historical paintings-as-documents-of-events in conversation with a GAN-film of, say, the Gettysburg Address? Instead of seeing deepfakes and their kind as a virus that threatens to overtake all image-sound creations (and subsume us in inescapable skepticism), why not fathom a countervailing movement—one that offers up creative treatments of actuality by means of artificial intelligence?

*David LaRocca*

Se por um lado é importante fazer documentários que não tenham a ingenuidade de acreditar que existem imagens puras e não manipuladas, e de dar pistas ao espectador para esta ideia da instabilidade do “factual” por outro lado é importante não ficarmos apenas nesta dimensão de suspeição que nos impede de emocionalmente entrar no universo do outro e na visão do realizador. Enquanto realizadora e espectadora, o meu envolvimento com as imagens e o seu sentido estão intrinsecamente ligados à forma do documentário, pois é ela que traduz o meu olhar e a minha visão sobre o mundo, e as pistas de percepção sobre essa visão da realidade

*Catarina Mourão*

I personally think that such a moment of “ease” of constant production and circulation of images demands more space for engaged filmmakers to critically question how we consume and relate to this incessant flow of images and information. I see the filmmaker’s voice as one that interrupts lazy habits of looking and understanding the world in a certain way. For me, engaged filmmaking asks viewers to constantly re-orient themselves and question their positionalities.

*Raed Rafei*

FICTION/DOCUMENTARY DIVIDE  
DISTINÇÃO FICÇÃO/DOCUMENTÁRIO

It is a fact that the medium of film has a reality of itself, like any other medium able to produce a context, and therefore a consciousness. This contradicts the categorizations which are imposed on the medium, and seems to act as a compartmentalization strategy in order to tame the medium. In many ways, this reflects the general capitalist attitude toward sciences and arts, with the dismissal of inherited knowledge or cultural significance through the process of opening markets, with a requirement for a clear division and hierarchy like that between fiction and documentary. If we look at categorization as an industrial process, in order to label, package and distribute, then we can see how the medium is subject to exploitation. Any product is a result of the processing of resources, and includes extraction, manufacturing and distribution, like the chicken egg industry, or mobile phone industry, or simply the complex industries at work behind tourism. Films too, are the result of a similar process. Filmmaking is constituted of three main stages. First is writing, which includes the observation of subjects in order to extract stories, sketching the method in a timeline, followed by the manufacturing of this imaginative into the shape of breakdown excel sheets, floor plans, lists of equipment. Then comes the production phase, consisting in capturing frames and sounds that represent something, both metaphorically and directly. This capturing process can be of a group of actors on a stage delivering a dialogue, or an image of sleepy passengers on a night train, or even just a scene of a quiet morning in a forest. These images are recorded and unified into a format unrelated to the actual physics and realities of these frames, and so they receive a new form, a new time, a resurrection, ready for distribution.

Thinking of fiction or documentary, both films captured with the same camera, as different categories, means submitting oneself to the will of the market and its conditions of demand and supply. The capitalistic logic imposes a division on the medium, and thereby limits the potential exploration of the medium. The question that should be raised is resist imposed categorizations through the market trends. This implies the question of whose eyes are looking at this. If it is through the lenses of the industry that one is looking, then the artists/filmmakers have to compromise their artistic integrity in order to be fished out of the sea of talents. Dismantling these capitalist tendencies from within the film industry is necessary to reclaim the space(s) of creative and progressive exchange between filmmakers themselves, producers and the rest of the world.

*Mohanad Yaqubi*

I agree that the distinction between documentary and fiction is merely a convenience. It stems from our modern obsession with classification and compartmentalization so as to rationalize the world around us. This distinction also allows for entire capitalistic industries and structures to exist and sustain themselves. Personally, I have always attempted in my film work to trouble that distinction. In *Salam* (2017), for instance, I tried to give life to the words of an anonymous Syrian woman interviewed about her sexuality by asking an actor, Rawya El Chab, to say and perform her exact quotes. I think the mere gesture of another woman not only repeating the Syrian woman's words but also letting them inhabit her, exist and resonate inside her, amplified the original testimony about bodies, desire, societal power trying to control them, and resistance. I think the space between the original (or a fantasized idea of an original) and its performance is very generative for viewers because it reveals the gap between reality and its inevitable performance on camera.

*Raed Rafei*

Quite obviously, the distinction between fiction and documentary is not absolute; it rather points to a stylistic convention which, like all conventions, can be quoted, appropriated, used in a different context. The Dardenne brothers' films (to a certain extent) look like documentaries, even if they are scripted. Frederick Wiseman spends months and months in the editing room to condense the material into scenes that, despite their purely documentary ingredients, have the narrative flavor that we are accustomed to encountering in fiction films. Film as record (registration), and film as language (syntax, juxtaposition, montage): both elements are always present, as Dai Vaughan reminds us. If this is the case, trust is crucial. A "documentary contract" is established each time, and it involves various (human and non-human) actors: the people behind the camera, the camera (and microphone), those in front of it, the institutional context, and, not least, us as spectators. However, since this "contract" most of the times remains implicit, the conditions that it codifies are precarious and unstable.

*Volker Pantenburg*

Le plus important sont sans doute des lignées (historiques, généalogiques) esthétiques et politiques dans lesquelles s'inscrivent ces films. Ces lignées politiques ou esthétiques sont transversales aux catégories (documentaire / fiction / reportage / film expérimental / etc...), et ne leur sont pas superposables. Elles ne sont ni aisées à identifier, ni étanches, car elles s'ancrent sur les projets de chaque film, sur des affinités politiques, et engagent une généalogie historique ouverte et pensante.

*Marie Voignier*

Se por um lado a distinção entre documentário e ficção continua a ser interessante do ponto de vista histórico, ético, e no seu modelo de produção, e exibição, a verdade é que o cinema mais interessante se encontra cada vez mais na fronteira entre ficção e não ficção. Do ponto de vista do realizador e do académico a distinção que talvez faça mais sentido é aquela que remete para formas diferentes de convocar o espectador: por um lado um cinema que utiliza uma construção dramática em que existe uma suspensão involuntária da descrença e um cinema que envolve uma narrativa mais épica, mais reflexiva e ensaística. Se identificamos a primeira categoria mais com a ficção e a segunda com o documentário, cada vez mais são os filmes que combinam os dois tipos de construção. E esta discussão não é puramente académica nem filosófica, ela tem consequências na produção de um filme, na sua mise-en-scène na escolha de actores profissionais ou não actores, na escolha dos decor. Neste sentido, hoje em dia, a distinção entre documentário e ficção pode até ser contraproducente para quem realiza e produz um cinema mais híbrido.

*Catarina Mourão*

I believe that all cinema is hybrid, and that there is no “pure documentary” or “pure fiction.” Only “impure cinema.” This happens because on one hand, with the exception of animated films, photography is at the root of all films. As a consequence of this, there is an apodictic character to cinema that makes its images testify to certain events that happened in a specific place and at a specific time. A film always works as an audiovisual proof that something *real* happened. It is a document. But on the other hand, where there’s human intervention, there is necessarily something along the lines of fiction. Photography is fiction. Science is fiction (remember Jean Painlevé). Religion is also fiction. Language is the touchstone of fiction (remember Jorge Luis Borges’s *Tlön*). Film editing and framing are certainly related to the principle of fiction. With this in mind, we should stress that fiction is no less real than anything else. Like cinema, reality is made of both the actual and the virtual (see Deleuze). All documentary films are “realist documentaries made of unreal events” (Cocteau) because, in the end, all reality is symbolic and impregnated with the imaginary. In addition, every fiction film is a documentary in its own shooting. It is an essay film in the sense that it is a rhetoric construct and an object that thinks about itself.

*José Bértolo*

La forme essayiste a une longue tradition au cinéma, comme le rappellent les textes de Hans Richter ou d’Alexandre Astruc, d’André Bazin ou d’André S. Labarthe. Si la notion connaît actuellement une sorte de renaissance dans le

domaine anglophone et ailleurs, elle risque de servir désormais comme passe-partout. Elle sert trop souvent pour classer non seulement toute hybridité ou forme expérimentale, mais aussi un certain type de discours critique, voire d'agentivité, attribué au cinéma. Si on trouve beaucoup de propositions philosophiques pour définir la fiction, les tentatives théoriques de définir le documentaire par rapport à la fiction sont souvent restées pragmatiques et liées aux pratiques de l'expérience des films. Une poétique du documentaire aurait peut-être plus de sens, car elle s'intéresserait davantage aux inventions des formes et à leur lien avec le quotidien et la vie. (Jacques Rancière parle d'une « poétique du savoir » quand il s'intéresse à la manière dont Fernand Braudel écrit de l'histoire.)

*Christa Blümlinger*

The division between documentary and fiction is still as relevant as always. However, their difference has little or perhaps nothing to do with their relationship to reality. As I see it, the important differences between documentary and fiction have to do with formal approaches. A film is a documentary because it looks and sounds like one. Of course, there are fictions that look like docs and vice-versa, but that happens when a filmmaker specifically chooses to draw from the formal toolbox of the other side.

The difference between capturing a representation of reality, or reality itself (or something close to it), is a subject that concerns equally fiction and documentary filmmakers.

When I film a person, I'm interested in their physical attributes, in how their body moves, in how they sound when they talk, etc. In a fiction film I choreograph this movement, rehearse it to the point that it becomes second nature to the actor, at which point their movements and sounds are triggered by muscle memory. In a documentary this muscle memory doesn't need to be generated, as it is part of the subject.

All movement is choreographed. Documentary aims to capture the movement that a subject has unconsciously learned throughout their life, while fiction aims to capture the movement that has been consciously learned and repeated over a short period of time. In both cases, a filmmaker aims to capture the essence of this choreography.

*Nicolás Pereda*

A diferença entre documentário e ficção não corresponde às distinções entre objetividade e subjetividade, entre acaso e manipulação ou entre realismo e expressionismo. O documentário insinua-se, antes de mais, enquanto *documento*, no sentido de um testemunho. Nestes termos, se o propósito for apenas a informação factual, como reclama a deontologia jornalística ou científica, então o cunho performativo tenderá a ser ignorado ou ficará



tecnicamente escondido. É esta aparente isenção metodológica que alimenta a associação direta entre o discurso documental e o realismo. Um documentarismo ingênuo, portanto. Situamos aqui o fundamento do termo e da sua aplicabilidade.

Mas o documentário, enquanto tal, também pode assumir uma vocação performativa ou estética. O documentário pode ser arte e o discurso da realidade pode ser poético. Os dois propósitos – realista e performativo – não se contrariam mutuamente, até porque também pode haver realismo através da performance. Não é na fidelidade ao plano dos factos – ou seja, no realismo epistémico – que reside a força poética do discurso documental, embora esse compromisso também possa ser usado pelo cineasta para objetivos artísticos (por exemplo, no cinema híbrido, a ambiguidade desconcertante onde a realidade e a ficção se tornam indiscerníveis). Não devemos, pois, confundir a busca de uma autenticidade estética, que é comum a todo o cinema, com o compromisso epistemológico próprio do discurso documental. No seu sentido mais abrangente, o realismo e a autenticidade não se confundem com a facticidade. A autenticidade estética transcende o realismo epistémico que é marca do documentário. Este não se distingue pela sua capacidade privilegiada de captar o autêntico ou o verdadeiro, mas simplesmente pelo seu compromisso com o plano dos factos.

Contudo, este compromisso particular não se encontra de modo inequívoco na própria forma do documentário, ainda que seja possível, até por conveniência taxonómica, distinguir traços, estilos e métodos tipicamente documentais. Em última análise, o compromisso próprio do discurso documental reside apenas no objetivo tácito do documentarista (que procura manter-se fiel aos factos), bem como na predisposição das audiências (confiantes nessa facticidade). É uma demarcação fenomenológica que escapa ao formalismo cinematográfico.

*Filipe Martins*

A couple of thoughts and sentences to remember: Frieda Grafe, in a text with the great title “Found Fiction: Better Documentaries” speaks of the “fictional formations that run through reality like narrative threads.” Dai Vaughan states: “Film is about something, whereas reality is not.” Maybe it is best to think of documentary and fiction as two aggregate states of the moving image; two potentials that can be activated and pushed in one direction or the other. Who would deny that a Douglas Sirk melodrama, say: *Written on the Wind*, is also a documentary that shows a *Universal* studio lot in 1956, and tells us how Lauren Bacall and Rock Hudson looked like at this very moment before the camera. Yet this does not prevent the film from being a wonderful fiction.

*Volker Pantenburg*

I agree with those who refuse to consider the distinction between fiction and document rigidly. They are not opposed, they belong to the same dialectic of narration, just as Ricoeur argues about the relationship of novel and history. Shub's interpretation of the Russian history was as strong as if she realized a fiction. But she was aware that interpretation can be even stronger if one finds the meaning of actuality in documents. But the opposite could be also true: Rithy Panh's documentary, *The Missing Picture*, reconstructs life in the camps under Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia with an original fiction device: traditional theater puppets. However, he precisely wants to show that the documents produced by the regime, which are the only documents available of the time, are fiction because they represent a fake version of history in which worker-prisoners are happy to be engaged in the effort of creating an authentic rural and communist Cambodia. In this case, the fiction in the movie unveils the fiction of the regime's propaganda.

*Dario Cecchi*

Se grande parte da produção documentária mais interessante, expressiva e arriscada que se realiza hoje lida, portanto, em sua própria forma filmica e em sua metodologia com a fricção das fronteiras entre autenticidade e encenação, experiência e performance, vida e teatro, produzindo com isso efeitos estéticos e políticos desestabilizadores, é porque o documentário, longe de ser o regime da autenticidade, da verdade, da fidedignidade e da pureza documental, como acreditam os mais ingênuos, dogmáticos ou puristas, tem sido, desde sua origem, um espelho partido do mundo, no sentido de que a imagem que ele revela é sempre distinta, rasurada, fissurada. O documentário seria assim, desde sempre, um teatro vazado pelo real. O próprio documentarista brasileiro Eduardo Coutinho reconhece, após a realização de seu original e desestabilizador *Jogo de cena* (2007), que “o teatro é o próprio lugar de tudo”, o lugar em que todos os filmes estão e no qual a fala constitui um espaço de permanente encenação e auto-estilização. Sendo assim, se a verdade é então sempre construída (o que não significa dizer, evidentemente, que ela seja falsificada, manipulada ou deturpada) pela relação entre quem filma e quem é filmado, isto é, pelo encontro entre os modos de produção da imagem e os meios de construção da realidade, é porque, precisa-se ressaltar, o documentário é uma prática relacional profundamente ética, onde não há verdades prévias.

Prática ética desprovida de uma ontologia enquanto gênero específico, o documentário, portanto, só existe na condição de uma fronteira instável que, para permanecer como fronteira, precisa ser sempre atravessada – e ele será tão mais potente quando sua construção der forma à fabulação, desejos e memória de uma coletividade, quando sua construção der forma às forças sociais e subjetivas que o produz.

*Ilana Feldman*

The productive frisson between fiction and documentary has been explored with increasing regularity and sophistication in recent decades, whether from many works by Werner Herzog and the late Agnès Varda or experiments by the likes of Casey Affleck, Sarah Polley, Joshua Oppenheimer, and Rithy Panh. Though topically diverse, these directors show a penchant for Wellesian provocation—consider Orson Welles’ *F for Fake* (1973) as a handy touchstone. In each case, we are given an opportunity to decode and delineate the seen from the unseen, the truth from the lie, the unrepeatable present (caught on film) from the staging or re-staging of an event that never was. Essay films yield another genre that illuminates our epistemological (and dare I say, moral) predicament. Despite, or perhaps because of, a wonderful set of extended remarks on the essay film—recent volumes by Timothy Corrigan, Nora Alter, Laura Rascaroli, Elizabeth Papazian, and Caroline Eages come immediately to mind—we may recall that Phillip Lopate made an attempt at securing criteria for the essay film, now back some thirty years ago (after all he was in *search* of the centaur). While debating “What counts?” remains a useful exercise, the persistence of the question motivates much compelling reflection on the nature of medium and its various form/content assemblages. Returning us to our inherited sense of form and content—indeed, per Adorno, which is which? As theorized by Corrigan, et al., and the contributors to their volumes, the essay film involves a perpetual negotiation between what is “captured” and how it is presented. With Adorno surfacing earlier, we could turn profitably to his “The Essay as Form,” its title announcing the essay’s very shape as a candidate for “sedimented content.” Thus “capture” and “edit” are necessarily forms of production.

*David LaRocca*

Aqui não há mistérios, está tudo claro. Na medida em que um documentário pode encenar-se como ficção (e faz isso há décadas, desde sua origem), toma-se, às vezes, o pato pelo gato. Mas eles são diferentes basta olhar a forma, o corpo e a voz. A voz do documentário enuncia asserções por todos os lados: mais propositivas, em alguns casos; mais estéticas, em outros. O modo de encenação pode ser *construído* (a ação de distribuir cartas no interior de um vagão de trem em *Night Mail*), pode ser *direto* (Paul Brennan vendendo bíblias em *Salesman*) ou *estético* (o peixe que nos olha do lado de lá da câmera Go Pro, em *Leviathan*), mas há sempre um *megaenunciador*, com sua grande boca imagética e sua voz enunciativa, repetindo: “então é assim se distribuem cartas em caixa no vagão do correio noturno”, “então é assim que se vendem bíblias em residências”, “então é assim que peixes mortos nos olham no olho, do chão do convés de um barco no mar de New Bedford”.

Não se trata aqui de ficção, ficção é outra coisa. Isto é claro e límpido, como água cristalina.

*Fernão Pessoa Ramos*

THINKING IMAGES  
PENSAR AS IMAGENS

The ontology of image has been a major question for philosophy since Plato. As far as motion pictures are concerned, I would like to mention at least two theories: Agamben's conception of image as 'gesture', and Derrida's conception of image as 'ghost'. The former thinks images dissect human habits and discover unconscious motions; the latter believes images are the products of a supplement that furnishes the subject's mind with imagery. Both philosophers displace intentionality from the mind to either an organic or machinic sort of pre-subjective unconscious. However, both philosophers fail to consider the role of assemblage. Motion pictures, as far as they are produced by media, depend indeed on an ontology of *mediation*, as argues Richard Grusin. There is no doubt both Agamben and Derrida would agree with this statement. But, in my view, their way of theorizing mediation denounces a sort of paralogism: they seek at the same time an authenticity beyond the media system and the very foundation of media. Gesture as well as supplement thus foreshadows a sort of 'original non-origin,' which is probably Heidegger's and before him Schelling's legacy. In my perspective, technological mediations are examined to figure out the modes of experimentation and communicability they display. Of course, I do not refer to a standard to which images ought to conform when I speak of communicability. The philosopher's task is to critically investigate what communication is, not develop strategies and models of communication.

*Dario Cecchi*

As imagens que vemos são reais. Assim oferecem-se para nós e assim existem. Quando existem em 'segunda mão', no filme, são chamadas imagens de arquivo: autorais, perdidas, familiares, de vigilância, etc. Pois imagens-câmera possuem esta qualidade, que herdaram das imagens reflexas: a de deixar o mundo se erguer em sua superfície como aparição, em bloco, em algo que lembra o automatismo maquínico. O campo imaginário, o sujeito imaginário, por aí se forma e assim caracteriza a fenda que introduz, rachadura no diamante do mundo. Pela desconstrução podemos até descobrir que nada habita esta fenda e nela o que está é o dilaceramento, ou a diferença. Mas é a partir de nosso campo existencial que a vemos. Nisto não há o que negar. Elas são, portanto, imagens reais, na medida em que nos encaminham neste encontro que somos nós mesmos, aquém de uma fenomenologia subtrativa da percepção. E esse encontro real é nossa carne, literalmente. Além dele existe o que sabemos existir

por nós e que é ainda nós, mesmo que no modo da ação ou da experiência audiovisual sensorial, naquilo que se segue ao recuo radical do ser.

*Fernão Pessoa Ramos*

Flora prospers in mould-like difficulty in the conditions of a cave. Enlightenment without sunlight features the entrapment of shadow play in only flickering narratives. The allegory of Plato's cave commences with beholden strange prisoners, having lived in the dark since childhood. They also serve a dark economy, their labour kept away from the daylight. A phantasmagoria stoked magical light show evinces animism in this hideout of secrecy, in an environment where only our inability to recognise is pronounced. The indeterminacy of prosopagnosia is both cinematic and mnemonic. Our first encounter within a garden of unknown, enigmatic fruits, sees ripening figments as those of a tree which escapes our classification, perhaps seen only in profile. Stranger still beliefs underscore attempts at defining a grammar for film. Here it comes again in wave after wave. Manifesto yes, exemplars maybe, form perhaps, review certainly, grammar, no. The edit is a 'space of potential, not fulfilment', suggests Claire Atherton. Conversely, conspiratorial paranoia shapes the industry of documentary practice, and its requirement is to take advantage, to expose, to piece together and tell us, to abide by the rules of its privileged access, always do it for the camera. However, if the documentary turn is part of our anatomical 'dossier', its motion comes towards us from behind. Dorsality is a turning distance and metabolic re-approach towards ourselves, whereby we meet ourselves as an always already technologized co-existent of intimate distances, as David Wills might describe it. In which case, why are there no counselling sessions at 'competition' documentary film festivals? Well, in most private gardens, trespassing is not allowed.

*Phillip Warnell*

One of the most promising and potentially productive paths for documentary to take involves a steady awareness of form/content interaction. It would seem that any given film can be used—indeed, like other art forms (such as painting)—to reflect back on itself, which is to say, it can summon us to reflect on it *as* a work of art. For some, such a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* undermines the suturing powers now familiar to film, and much loved. Yet, it may be that efforts at documentary are afforded some latitude on this score—that they can, in a word, allow *awareness* to be a more conspicuous feature of the practice, indeed, one of the attributes that most attracts us to making and watching such films in the first place. Indeed, *mise en abîme* would appear to function as a ready-made tool for critique, since it is both familiar and yet remains effective; its deployment can contribute to narrative coherence while simultaneously putting an audience in a position to judge the claims of such coherence. Thus, framing

devices and the status of “contained” footage, among other strategies, may encode self-critique, and in that gesture also generously extend an invitation to critique by those who experience the film as an object of inquiry. If immersion may blunt one’s critical faculties, then embedding any tricks for troubling that immersion appear promising. Critique, in turn, becomes inherent to the art’s status and our capacity to reflect upon it.

*David LaRocca*

O cinema documental se o entendermos da forma mais livre possível, numa abordagem ensaística que questiona os seus mecanismos de construção e a construção da própria realidade, será sempre um veículo ideal para questionar o que são as imagens, de onde vêm, como são produzidas. Esse questionamento implica para mim a apropriação dessas imagens, a sua dissecação, a sua descontextualização, manipulação e mesmo reinvenção. Há uma analogia possível que se opera entre o trabalho com o arquivo (imagens produzidas no passado), e o trabalho com a memória. Ambos são corpos em constante construção, fruto de um olhar muito subjectivo e que obrigam a uma reinterpretação no momento em que são reactivados. O arquivo exposto em bruto pode ser fascinante mas só na medida em que dá espaço ao realizador para o interpretar, o mesmo sucede com a memória quando é reavivada. Ela só existe quando materializada em imagens mentais ou palavras. Bem sei que estamos a falar de corpos com naturezas diferentes mas enquanto realizadora, eles serão apropriados e traduzidos para imagens e sons e nessa medida têm um estatuto parecido.

*Catarina Mourão*

Il n’y a pas une (seule) forme qui pense, comme l’a si bien dit Deleuze. Le cinéma, y compris le documentaire, articule justement des « blocs d’espace-durée », il n’invente pas de concepts. Quand il ré-enchaîne et retourne les images, quand il produit des intervalles entre la bande-son et la bande-image, permettant d’ouvrir vers d’autres champs et des imaginaires, il peut faire preuve de ce que Deleuze appelle un « acte de création ». A Godard, Straub-Huillet, Duras ou Marker on peut associer des cinéastes plus jeunes, Harun Farocki, Shelly Silver, Nicolas Rey.

Ceci dit, il y a aussi une tradition forte de l’avant-garde, née en partie de l’art (post-)conceptuel, se situant entre pensée et cinéma (Hollis Frampton, Morgan Fisher, Werner Nekes, Valie Export ...). Tout récemment, un chercheur américain en cinéma, se présentant à la fois comme philosophe et comme cinéaste, considère que les deux activités s’équivalent : ses films seraient de la philosophie par d’autres moyens, dit David N. Rodowick (« Philosophy by other means », conférence au Mass Culture Workshop, 2019, University of Chicago). Par cette affirmation, Rodowick ne vise pas le documentaire, mais ce

qu'on appelle la « non-fiction » et un débat concernant depuis quelques décennies déjà la fonction de l'art (contemporain). L'attrait du cinéma d'avant-garde et de l'art contemporain a beaucoup influencé les manières de considérer aujourd'hui le cinéma documentaire. Constatant qu'on invite aujourd'hui les films de James Benning dans des festivals de documentaire, on peut observer, du côté de la critique et de la diffusion des films, une volonté d'élargir la forme, intégrant des domaines d'expression qui étaient encore largement séparées ou réservées à des niches il y a 20 ans. On revient d'une certaine manière aussi vers des formes premières, quand le cinéma des premiers temps réclamait sa vocation d'enregistrer pour une mémoire du futur et quand l'attention portée au détail et au rythme importait.

*Christa Blümlinger*

In recent years, films by Joshua Oppenheimer and Rithy Panh come to mind as signal instances of getting us to think about the relationship—purported and otherwise—between mind and memory, memory and media. Where a generation or so ago Alain Resnais and Claude Lanzmann undertook similar experiments (e.g., respectively in *Night and Fog* and *Shoah*), Oppenheimer and Panh have pushed into new territory: the fabrication of facts, enactment and re-enactment, cross-fertilization of genres, de-centering the director-as-*auteur*, extending the number of viable media for storytelling or the expression of memory (e.g., drawings, clay figurines, playing dress-up, etc.). Yet, such territory, however novel, admits of being recognizable to the Griersonian legacy of the “creative treatment of actuality.” And we should not miss the chance to recommend the “creative treatment of possibility,” which is to say the way documentaries can experiment with the future, such as in Kirsten Johnson’s *Dick Johnson is Dead* (2020); here, while human death is assured, the time and manner of death remain unknown. We get gerund documentary: reenactments of events (in this case “dying”) that have yet to happen or may never transpire in precisely the ways we see on screen. The very notion of counterfactual is reconceived: alternatives arrive before actualities. Meanwhile, a different legacy, also familiar to earlier generations—perhaps exemplified by the notion of “bearing witness,” and including the language of primary and secondary witnesses—seems now, in the wake of Oppenheimer, Panh, and others, to be shaken. Oppenheimer and Panh do not present documentary films comprised of footage they took “at the time of” the events they describe (though, to be sure, found footage plays a role). Rather, there is something decidedly present-tense about the works I have in mind (e.g., *The Act of Killing* and *The Missing Picture*). The subjectivity and unreliability of memory itself becomes a central part of their interrogations of the past they address, if not summon. As Emerson once admonished: “[l]ive no longer to the expectation of these deceived and deceiving people with whom we converse.” Without any CGI or GAN, Oppenheimer and Panh have done just fine to challenge any lingering hopes for

the objectivity of memory and its “capture” on film. While training their attention on undeniable realities—the deaths of thousands of people—they, nevertheless, leave open the *manner* in which the truths of history and memory are rendered. Their films showcase how fact lives in communion with fiction; however troubling to admit, they are tandem enterprises.

*David LaRocca*

I think film, and particularly essay film as a subgenre of documentary, is a potent editorializing commentary on the past (as present). It can create associations and frictions that trouble how we consider the present and the past. I am particularly interested in the myriad of ways how different forms of documentaries have been able to engage with archives in order to engage with forgotten, marginalized or erased histories.

*Raed Rafei*

I think that in some ways, any film is an inventory of an archive, an index of shots. A film performs as a visual catalogue of an archive, an indication to its existence, the original shot. In many ways, the Lumiere brothers’ “*Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon*”, is the first and the last film at the same time. The film and its archive, together, in one shot, and in the same can. The film doesn’t exist outside of its archive, and since the reality of images only exists in its archives, it therefore can only be read from the traces of the archivist, which could be the filmmaker, a film lab, or an activist group. This archiving process – labeling, indexing and categorizing – can be considered the meta context, or the reality of a film. A reality that starts when a film is related to a particular context, for example to the location where it is kept, be it a personal collection, or a corner of a museum archive, something that allows us to make connections and deploy a narrative out of it. In that sense, it is impossible to isolate filmmaking as a process from its archival tendencies. Actually, this is a tension that many filmmakers are facing in the process of filmmaking. Many of them look precisely at the rushes that are not needed after the film is done. Somehow, rushes are that which needs to be forgotten. They expose the documentary aspect of a fiction, and vice versa. Rushes can tell more about the reality of making a documentary film, since archival practices show what was not included in the frame, that is, the narrative of the filmmaker.

*Mohanad Yaqubi*

In my new essay film, *Al-Atlal* (The Ruins), I was prompted by a drawing of a Hammam (bathhouse) in my hometown of Tripoli that I found in an old travel book from the 1500s by a French traveler. The text describing the Hammam and the image itself were striking in how they gestured towards power dynamics



between the West and the Middle East that are still relevant until today. They referenced in particular the complicated power dynamics between patrons of the Hammam, and attendants working there. I decided to reflect on the power of this archival image, itself a mediated representation of a specific experience of the Hammam, by conjuring other modern and not so-modern images and placing them in dialogue with it.

*Raed Rafei*

In a way, the archival approach to images would be the most reflective approach to the reality of the image; a documentation of the process that produces archives, traces of documentations, and the realistic understanding that there is a way out of the frame, in order to read the filmmakers intentions and their context. It eliminates any possibility of this notion of reality/authenticity of an image. I am trying to say that there is no such thing as a documentary that documents reality objectively. But what is this obsession with reality? And who benefits from this possibility and ability to represent reality?

*Mohanad Yaqubi*