

Show and Tell: The identification of documentary film

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The congress is over and you are back in your hotel room. The weather outside is damp and cold and you feel tired after three intense days filled with plenary lectures and panel discussions. You are lying in your bed, zapping through the TV channels. Suddenly, a film catches your attention and you hesitate to press the remote-control button again. You are taken by a long travelling through the ruins of a Western looking palace in India, empty rooms, shattered windows, broken china, wind, dust.¹ You increase the volume and start to hear a soundtrack of bird song, the wind whistling in the broken glass, footsteps and creaking wood floors, even though the house looks deserted and dilapidated. Unfamiliar with the local language and the setting of regional cable channels, you have no immediate means to conclude anything about the film's identity. Is it fiction or nonfiction? *Cinéma d'auteur* or a poetic documentary about post-colonialism? Still under the influence of all the speculative atmosphere of the congress, you digress about the proper distinction between these categories. "Necessary and sufficient conditions", "ontological demarcation", "intentionality", are terms that pop into your mind while you softly wonder at the mesmerizing images of a long-abandoned garden. After a while you realize that you can't determine what kind of film you're watching just by looking at it and you start considering several hypotheses. Still trying to assimilate your colleagues' rigorous arguing you think you could solve the riddle by using a kind of dichotomous key. A or B? You ask yourself again the question

¹ Zarina Bhimji, *Yellow Patch* (2011).

“Does it matter whether I’m watching fiction or nonfiction?”

A. “No, it doesn’t matter.”

You imagine three ways of considering the inexistence of a distinction between fiction and nonfiction film: either because all film is fictional; or because all film is documental; or because “fiction” and “nonfiction” are modes of reception, and not ontological categories, and it is up to you to decide which one to adopt. In order to follow these possibilities, “documentary film” becomes a more useful and constrained concept than that of “nonfiction film”. Documentaries are also the paradigmatic case of nonfiction film and the debate on the distinction between fiction and nonfiction film usually takes the form of a debate on the conceptual boundaries (or lack thereof) between fiction film and documentaries. Arguably, no other concept in film theory has been more discussed and scrutinized. Ever since the first manifestations of the genre, its definition and value has been the matter for debate among film scholars and philosophers. Naturally, documentaries do not exhaust the full extension of the “nonfiction film” concept and there are other genres that participate in that extension - such as propaganda film, the early Lumière *actualités*, ciné-poems, metacinema, commemorative and autobiographical films - but none has been so deeply connected to the possibility of identifying the proper boundaries that separate fiction and nonfiction film.

The idea of subverting the viewing of “documentaries” *qua* documentaries strikes you as particularly intriguing. They are perceived by many people as objective renderings of events and thought to serve an important didactic function. Besides, you

can't minimize the political role that documentaries may acquire and the militant impact that many have upon their audiences. They seem to constitute the quintessence of what cinema is all about, fulfilling the mission of an essentially realistic medium and paying due tribute to its photographic basis, which was, as someone suggested, Nature's own way of returning to us (to itself) the "visible reality" that disappeared in the cosmology of modern scientists such as Einstein or Heisenberg.² But photographic realism was never a consensual view and the charisma of documentary film seems to have been followed the ups and downs of the reputation of realism within the community of film artists and theorists.

For a moment you consider the fascinating thought that documentaries are just a sub-genre of fiction film. They could be perceived as constituting a fictional mode only somewhat more homogeneous and complex. They are more homogenous because normally the person who conceives it is also the one who directs it, whereas most fiction films are adaptations of someone else's literary work. Documentaries are also more complex because they are usually contrived as a series of heterogeneous images with distinct provenances and distinct symbolic functions.³ There is also the claim that all representation is essentially fictional and film necessarily involves a number of stylistic, narrative and perspectival choices that should make anyone rather skeptical of the traditional realist view according to which photography and film share

² Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

³ Jacques Rancière, *La Fable Cinématographique* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 203: "Le cinéma «documentaire» est un mode de la fiction à la fois plus homogène et plus complexe. Plus homogène parce que celui qui conçoit l'idée du film est aussi celui qui le réalise. Plus complexe puisqu'il enchaîne ou entrelace le plus souvent des séries d'images hétérogènes."

this special ability to deliver the full extent of the “pro-filmic event” that generated it, that is, the original state of affairs of which the photographic rendering is a remaining *trace* – just like fingerprints are causally linked to the fingers that generated them. After all, every scene involves a “point of view” and not every shot of an object will be able to represent that object in an identifiable way, which means that even the most “natural” and verisimilar photographic rendering involves a stylistic choice, which means that “realism” is, above all, the name of a style.⁴ Choices and points of view entail subjective manipulation and subjective manipulation implies that every film is fabricated. But to create a proper representation requires that its fabricated structure has to be concealed and thus every film is essentially an illusion and a lie.⁵ Also fascinating would be to consider the opposite notion that every single film holds some sort of documental value and thus even the most formulaic Hollywood movie could be watched as primarily a documental trace (of the actors performing in it, or the stage of development of a given mode of production, or the overall *Zeitgeist*).⁶

⁴ Cf. Noël Carroll, “From real to reel: entangled in nonfiction film”, in *Theorizing the moving image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 243. After discussing the proper way of photographing a cube, Rudolf Arnheim concluded that “[A]s a preliminary, people who contemptuously refer to the camera as an automatic recording machine must be made to realize that even in the simplest photographic reproduction of a perfectly simple object, a feeling for its nature is required which is quite beyond any mechanical operation.” (Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1957), 11.

⁵ Carroll, “From real to reel,” 246.

⁶ Cf. Richard Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

You may even combine both views and adopt a sort of subjectivist theory of nonfiction film by claiming that the difference between documentary and fiction film is not in the object-film but in the mind of the spectator.⁷ In fact, if you consider the tremendous creative freedom with which authors of both fiction and nonfiction film manipulate their respective materials you may wish to conclude that the “philistine bifurcation” between both genres cannot reside in the inherent textual features of each film but must be rather a matter of the mode of reception in which each spectator decides to view the film. The question you should ask yourself, then, is not “*what* is a documentary” but rather “*when* is a documentary” because it all depends on *who* is viewing the film and *how* she is viewing it. Audiences should be given *carte blanche* to “perversely” comprehend fiction films nonfictionally, and vice-versa, by subverting the conventions by which reference and causality are assigned to the images they see on the screen. It is entirely up to you to watch the film on your hotel TV as a radical ghost story or as a documentary on the politics of post-colonial India.

However, the fact that this difference is transposed to “the mind of the audience” does not deflect the fact that a difference is supposed to exist. It is no longer a difference in the manifest properties of the object but rather in the mode of reception you decide to adopt. Genres and types of film are difficult to define and apparently hybrid films – such as *JFK* or *F for Fake* – make this task even trickier,

⁷ Dirk Eitzen, “When is a Documentary?: Documentary as a Mode of Reception,” *Cinema Journal*, 35-1 (1995); Edward Brannigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, New York: Routledge, 1992; Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited*, London: British Film Institute, 1995.

For a critical survey of subjectivist theories of nonfiction film cf. Carl Plantinga, “The Limits of Appropriation – Subjectivist Accounts of the Fiction / Nonfiction Film Distinction”, in *The Philosophy of Documentary Film*, ed. David LaRocca (London: Lexington Books, 2017).

but modes of reception are just as difficult to circumscribe.⁸ Also, the kind of mannerist film genre known as “mockumentary” manipulates precisely that which usually locks the spectator onto a prescribed mode of attention from which she very hardly moves, and creates variations on recognizable prototypical genres. An entire sub-genre of film is planned on the assumption that the spectator’s viewing protocols are heavily determined and controlled, and play with the subversion of that which conditions her reception: *Zelig*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *Paranormal Activity*, *Cloverfield*. And even if the film’s indexing eliminates some of the hybridness and fuzziness that would affect the spectator’s attention, we could speculate about the existence of a film that would be impossible to track down, a more extreme case than *No Lies* or *Daughter Rite*. Why this is so difficult to imagine is part of the story about your hotel room night.

In fact, cases where moviegoers watch a film outside its standard indexation and mode of appreciation must be pretty rare indeed.⁹ But even if heterodox viewing would become standard practice, it still seems odd that spectators would decide to adopt a given viewing mode without sufficient knowledge of what “fictional” and “nonfictional mode” stand for or require, or why are those the only two viewing options available. Besides, the fact that there is always the possibility of a “shift” between modes of reception implies that a comprehensive distinction between both concepts should be possible. How? Well, maybe the distinction is established by the social practices and cultural conventions (including viewing schemas) that belong to

⁸ Cf. Plantinga, “The limits of appropriation,” 119.

⁹ Cf. Eitzen, “When is a Documentary,” 95.

our culture or “form of life”.¹⁰ However, this seems to constitute a subjectivism of a higher order because if social practices were to change so would our normal indexing of film. The shift would not be so idiosyncratic and immediate as initiated by each spectator individually but it would still be, in a way, a subjective move. On the other hand, how often does such a category-shattering cultural shift occur?

While you think through these questions, you remember the case of one of your favorite classic documentaries, *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922), and you recall having read that in one of the scenes Nanook was not actually towing his line against a fish but rather reenacting a fishing scene with the assistance of several off-screen helpers.¹¹ You remember feeling a bit disappointed when you found out about this and you realize that there seems to be some kind of epistemic resistance to the fact that the history of production of documentaries and fiction films should be considered indistinct because, if *indistinctionalists* are right, all depends on some kind of attention to the neutral film X that is being shown. However, what the Nanook example shows you is that, in a very significant way, the respective history of production does seem relevant in the case of documentaries (and nonfiction film, in general) whereas it doesn’t strike you as relevant in the case of fiction film. For one, there is a normative constraint: documentaries should not deceive the viewer, which means that they invite a sort of inquisitive viewing mode that simply does not apply to the case of fiction film. This is so because documentaries necessarily involve a tension between what is being shown and what is being told. In the case of Nanook’s

¹⁰ This corresponds to the view defended by Eitzen and, in part, by Carl Plantinga: “the distinction between fiction and nonfiction does not reside in the minds of the audience, but in the objective social practices and viewing schemas of a culture.” (Plantinga, “The limits of appropriation,” 121).

¹¹ Cf. Gregory Currie, “Documentary Traces: Film and the Content of Photographs”, in *The Philosophy of Documentary Film*, ed. David LaRocca (London: Lexington Books, 2017), 110.

fake fishing what is being shown does not correspond to what is being told. But is this epistemic dissonance sufficient to prevent the amalgamation between fiction film and documentary? You could decide to watch *Casablanca* as if it were a documentary about Humphrey Bogart. But the fact that the film isn't actually telling you anything about Bogart means that no epistemic dissonance of that sort can arise. And if this is not possible, it probably means that you won't be motivated to adopt a nonfictional viewing mode while watching *Casablanca*. The benefits would be trivial, at best, and you'd be just mistaking the documental value of the film for its putative documentary status. On the other hand, you could decide to watch *Nanook of the North* as a fiction film. But can you really become indifferent to the film's history of production and comfortably accommodate that feeling of slight disappointment whenever you watch the fake fishing scene?

You seem to be on to something here. The fact that spectators of documentaries reserve for themselves the possibility of digging for dissonances between what is shown and what is told seems to be an attitude you cannot adopt *vis-à-vis* fiction film. Consequently, another question arises: what triggers you into adopting this attitude? And this leads you into considering the second alternative reply to your original question:

B. "Yes, it is important to know whether you're watching fiction or nonfiction film."

So you assume that there is a distinction between fiction film and documentaries and that it can be identified within a normative account of film, that is, a distinction that needs to be taken into account in order to interpret and assess

correctly any film. The terms in which such distinction is established, however, are not yet clear to you.

So, what is a documentary? You could start on by looking at the kinds of film that have been traditionally classified as such. Film scholar Bill Nichols has proposed a useful typology of documentaries divided into six categories: the poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative documentary.¹² The most clear-cut case is that of Expository Documentaries, that include the typical voice-over narrator who follows a script providing explanations and arguments in favor of a given interpretation. Images and sounds are simply used to illustrate or provide a loose (i.e., non-essential) evidence for what is being stated by the narrator. Also significant is the Observational Documentary, where traditional narrative cues - like voice-over narration - are eschewed in favor of a more straightforward presentation of the state of affairs – some call this the *pro-filmic event* – via the simple juxtaposition of visual and sonic traces, and a more open-ended and ambiguous treatment of the subject.

But, naturally, a descriptive approach of this kind begs an important question: first of all, there has to be a prototypical concept of “documentary” required in order to start collecting and classifying its multiple instances. That is, we are still in need of a normative account of the application of the concept.¹³ At this point, you may want

¹² Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

¹³ Bill Nichols identifies three basic assumptions involved in our common “sense that a film is a documentary”: documentaries are about reality, about real people and they tell stories about what really happened. Thus, he assumes that our most widespread intuitions about the ontology of documentaries are all based “on the indexical capacity of the photographic image, and of sound recording, to replicate what we take to be the distinctive visual or acoustic qualities of what they record” (Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 34). We shall address this view when we examine the theories that

to consider two ways of tackling the issue: either that the distinction is intrinsic to and manifest in the film, or that it is some kind of framing or indexing of the film that sets its status in a way that spectators cannot fail to notice.

Considering the first option you start imagining what a Realist Theory of Documentary could be like. You want to justify the distinction between fiction and nonfiction by appealing to the essential and manifest properties of the film, and by establishing a set of sufficient conditions that immediately determine whether a given film is fictional or not. Your best option here seems to be to consider the special appeal and objectivity of documentaries based on the assumption that they *show* us their respective subjects in the most direct manner possible, namely, in the way they act as indexical records of their subjects by being photographic traces left behind by the relevant events.¹⁴

If you favor the second option then you move towards a Relational Theory of Documentary based on the conviction that nothing is conclusively fictional or nonfictional solely on the basis of their inherent or textual features. In order to draw

portray documentary as a kind of indexical record.

¹⁴ Gregory Currie, "Documentary Traces". This article constitutes a revisitation of his classic piece "Visible traces: documentary and the contents of photographs," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57-3 (1999). When comparing the more recent text to the original version of his theory, the most striking difference consists in the way Currie seems to drop his previous, and most controversial, requirement that in documentary the meaning flows from the image to the narrative, whereas in fiction film meaning flows from the narrative to the image. In its place a different requirement becomes more salient, namely, that documentaries invite the spectator to engage on an assessment of the "degree of coherence" between the photographic *trace* and the expository *narrative*. This epistemological shift fits the kind of integrated theory our accidental philosopher is trying to compose.

that distinction, one needs to look for the non-manifest, relational properties of film, which means that one has to consider the way each film is in relation to something else.¹⁵ So now you have to find out what that relevant “something else” is. It seems true to say that documentaries carry with them a certain assertive force and a quasi-scientific aura, and this seems to be induced by the way these films are intended to be seen. So maybe your best bet is to look for that *something else* in the intentions surrounding the creation of these films. Not so much in what they *show* us but in the way they *tell* us things, their *propositional mode*, so to speak.

Show or Tell? This seems to be your basic option at this stage. Your first impression is that you seem to be covering the two most important aspects that you yourself find alluring in documentaries. First, a Realist Theory of Documentary stresses and explains the importance of the phenomenological dimension of documentaries, or at least of an important portion of all documentaries produced. Certain films (namely, Observational Documentaries) grant their viewers with a particular affective and cognitive connection to the events, objects or people that happen to be the topic of the film. They are the second best thing next to actually been there – because the camera *was actually there*, “like the veil of Veronica pressed to the face of human suffering”.¹⁶ Part of this sense of immediacy is explained by the fact that photographs - like footprints, death masks or tree rings - are naturally counterfactually dependent on their referents, meaning that any change in the referent

¹⁵ Noël Carroll, “Fiction, non-fiction, and the film of presumptive assertion: a conceptual analysis,” in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, ed. R. Allen et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 179.

¹⁶ André Bazin, *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), 34.

would automatically produce a change in its photographic rendering.¹⁷ Hence, they are independent of their author's beliefs and may indeed survive beyond authorial expectations and beliefs, given that unexpected findings may occur through the spectator's inspection, as celebrated in Antonioni's *Blow-Up*. This caption of the phenomenological qualities of the event or object involved - its raw feel, if you will - and the corresponding special sense of affective access, of "nearness", "intimacy" or "proximity", explains much of the power of documentaries and should be acknowledged by any definition of the genre.¹⁸ Ultimately it is this phenomenological trait that makes it possible for documentaries to resist their assimilation to the realm of fiction film. However, if taken alone, it does not seem sufficient to prevent dissolving the prototypical documentary within the realm of nonfiction film. After all, last year's autobiographical video of Ms. Smith's trip to Rome also retains some level of phenomenological intimacy with the pro-filmic event.

Second, a Relational Theory of Documentary provides a better way to explain the special kind of reception we reserve for documentaries - you decide to call it the epistemological reception mode - and the assessment criteria that audiences inevitably follow when viewing films that are indexed as "documentaries". However, you anticipate that much of what the average spectator is doing when assessing a documentary is based on the way the film acts as a proper natural counterfactual (re) presentation of its subject (the way it is presented as "evidence" for the facts at hand). This seems to suggest a possible integration or at least a reflective balance between

¹⁷ Kendall Walton, "Transparent pictures: On the nature of Photographic Realism," in *Photography and Philosophy - Essays on the Pencil of Nature*, ed. S. Walden (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 36-39.

¹⁸ Cf. Mikael Pettersson, "Depictive traces: On the phenomenology of photography," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 69-2 (2011), 185.

both accounts. But before you consider this balance, you decide to take some time to think about each option separately.

B.1. *Showing*: the Realist Approach

The idea at stake here is that there is something that intrinsically differentiates documentaries from other film genres, namely the way they put us in phenomenological contact with the facts at hand. You hold this in part accountable for that mesmerizing effect that is still holding you in contemplation of the images on your hotel room TV.

The “showing” dimension of documentaries, by which the spectator is allowed to apprehend the “phenomenological qualities” of the subject, is an important characteristic of the genre and finds support in all those theories of film that insist in returning cinema to its photographic basis. The phenomenological intensity of being exposed to actual visual traces of events, people or objects is justified by two main reasons: an emotive and a cognitive one. The first relates to the way the spectator is given a special kind of *affective* access to the facts, manifested in that sense of close contact provided by actual traces of the events. The cognitive reason tells us that, unlike fiction film, documentaries are intrinsically misleading and constitute therefore permanent challenges to the spectator’s powers of cognition. This is due to the fact that they are based on traces and not on testimonies.¹⁹ Testimonies – like a witness’s reconstitution of a car accident - are intentionally counterfactually dependent on their subjects, which means that the way they represent depends on the author’s mentation,

¹⁹ Currie, “Documentary traces,” 97.

for instance, in the way it mediates the seizing of visual information. Traces don't depend on what we think we saw or heard, they are naturally counterfactually dependent on their referents: any change in the referent would immediately imply a change in the trace. In other words, traces are non-doxastic representations – they are independent of their author's agenda of intentions and may lead to revelations directly concerning the referent - whereas testimonies are doxastic forms of representation - they represent what the author thinks was the case and may never lead to surprises. Thus, because the author cannot erase their "brute causation", traces are involuntary renderings of their subjects and can be further scrutinized leading to unexpected findings, namely of details that weren't supposed to be there, like the murder inadvertently photographed by the character of Thomas Hemmings in *Blow-Up*.

Because they elude the author's creative control, trace-based documents have a "special capacity to undermine themselves"²⁰ and they retain the possibility of discovering inconsistencies between the film traces and whatever the author may believe and / or wants us to believe, namely through the narrative she creates. In a concealed or conspicuous way, the question "might it be lying?" is always part of the way we view documentaries because we are always aware of possible dissonances between what is shown and what is told.²¹ Thus, documentaries are open to falsification as a result of the spectator's inquiry. How often this falsification occurs is, of course, another matter. Nevertheless, the fact that this remains a possibility seems to be a clear ontological difference in regard to fiction film. Naturally, inconsistencies within the narrative structure of a fiction film may always be detected and continuity mistakes or visual bloopers are often detected, but their possibility is

²⁰ Currie, "Visible traces," 291.

²¹ Eitzen, "When is a documentary," 91.

not constitutive of the filmic genre in the way the possibility of epistemic inconsistencies is essential to documentaries. This may help us to explain, at least in part, why documentaries are chosen as a communication medium for scientific theses: they hold the potential for being tools of discovery. Now you start to speculate that the fact that mere existence of filmic traces prescribes a given epistemic attitude may be a hint that this kind of theory can be made compatible with theories that describe documentaries as a kind of veridical assertion.²²

The possibility of inconsistencies leads you to consider yet another trait of documentaries *vis-à-vis* fiction film. Because they constitute traces left by their pro-filmic events, photograph and film hold two different layers of representation.²³ They

²² Carl Plantinga has already presented a way in which theories of documentary as indexical record and theories of documentary as assertion may be drawn together (Carl Plantinga, "What a documentary is, after all," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63-2 (2005)). His proposal is that documentaries involve asserted veridical representations and that these may assume the form of visual traces or veridical assertions. In the case of Expository Documentaries or, more generally speaking, documentaries whose propositional content is directly or implicitly at stake, the veridical representation aims at truthfulness. In the case of Observational Documentaries, i.e., documentaries with a more sensual character, veridical representation is to be found in the way the documentary provides a "reliable guide to relevant elements of the pro-filmic scene". What Plantinga offers, then, is the gathering of both theories under the overarching concept of "veridical film representation". What I propose is somewhat different: the necessary interconnection of the aspects of documentary highlighted by both theories – *show* and *tell*, the phenomenological and the propositional – as a general theory of the prototypical documentary. So prototypical, in fact, that more peripheral or category-defiant films are assessed in the way they meet or transgress the set of conditions that characterize the more standard film.

²³ On the phenomenology involved in the ability to either collapse or segregate these two layers - the "story told" and "the events filmed" -, cf. Robert Hopkins, "What do we see in Film?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66-2 (2008).

represent-by-origin that “of” what they are (they offer a “physical portrayal”), and represent-by-use that of which they are “about” (they produce a “nominal portrayal”).²⁴ *That of which they are* is that of which they are a trace; but when used in a fictional context, photographic representations can be about something different from that of which they are. *Casablanca* represents-by-origin Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman and Hollywood’s star system during the Second World War, besides representing-by-use Rick Blaine, Ilsa Lund and their fictional world. Documentaries are distinctive in this respect because their constitutive images are made to work exclusively on the first layer.²⁵ Thus, in documentaries, meaning is fully determined by representation-by-use and the consequent narrative cannot interfere with the fact that the image only represents by way of being a photographic trace of the original state of affairs. In this respect, one could even think heuristically about a putative “ideal documentary”, that is a sustained narrative whose images only represent photographically: they only represent that of which they are.

This is a seductive account but some doubts start to cross your mind. First, this realist take seems to remove from the realm of documentary any film that is not causally based upon a set of visual traces. After all, what else could supply that sense of phenomenological awe and close contact to the event apart from actual footage? A

²⁴ Cf. Gregory Currie, “Pictures of King Arthur: Photography and the Power of Narrative”, in *Photography and Philosophy – Essays on the Pencil of Nature*, (Scott Walden (ed.)), Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, 263-283. The distinction between “representation-by-origin” and “representation-by-use” corresponds to Monroe Beardsley’s difference between the way each shot is a “physical portrayal” of its source and the way it may be taken to be a “nominal portrayal”, i.e., taken to represent a state of affairs (person, object, or event) that is different than its photographic provenance (Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958), Chapter VI).

²⁵ Cf. Currie, “Visible traces,” 290.

strict distinction between testimonies and traces, and the fact that only the latter can afford that potential *self-defeating quality* inherent to proper documentaries makes it hard to accept within the genre films that are more saliently based on historical testimonies or scientific speculation, like historical documents about Neanderthal men or cosmological hypotheses such as the Big Bang. Accordingly, docudrama and historic re-enactments, for instance, shouldn't be listed as "documentaries", properly speaking. In many cases, like Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, there simply can be no photographic traces of the subjects involved (such as the primordial Big Bang). Ultimately, "the first sixty-five or so years of documentary history"²⁶ would not count as such since the kind of film favored by this account – direct cinema or *cinéma vérité* – is relatively recent and dates back to the 1960's.

You may be ready to accept this consequence and propose a category other than "documentary" reserved for those films that are assertive but without the awe of intimacy and the epistemic resilience that only photographic traces can provide. But you could also try an alternative doxastic explanation for that sense of proximity by looking at the way the *belief* that photographs enable that sense of proximity is produced in the viewer.²⁷ You could describe this as a three-step process: 1) the viewer has good reasons to believe the photograph provides epistemic access, namely (but not exclusively) natural counterfactual dependency; 2) by accepting those reasons the viewer believes that photographs grant her epistemic access to the phenomenon depicted; 3) it is that epistemic confidence that causes the sense of intimacy. This doxastic account could accept other sources for that sense of intimacy. In order to take step 1 without photographs, the viewer could use relevant standards

²⁶ Plantinga, "What a documentary is," 109.

²⁷ Pettersson, "Depictive traces," 192.

for assessing the way testimonies or intentional counterfactual representations may provide proper epistemic access to the event or, in other words, constitute the “second best thing” to actually being there. Arguably, if no camera was or could be present at the unravelling of the event, first person testimonies, non-photographic traces, or even intentional counterfactual depictions may acquire a level of epistemic reliability that cause a similar sense of intimacy.

You recall the case of the famous drawing of *Marie-Antoinette conduite à l'échafaud* by David and the way Stefan Zweig described its “sinister power” as a kind of intimacy with the actual event. It is obviously an intentional counterfactual representation since virtually nothing that is on the paper escaped David’s mentation. However, there is also something of a quasi-indexical nature that seems to match the “brute causation” of photographs. What could possibly work as a set of “good reasons” that would lead the viewer to consider the drawing as granting epistemic access to the event? Consider these: (1) the materials before our eyes were *actually present* at the time Marie Antoinette was being taken to the scaffolding; (2) the drawing is a literal trace of its author’s activity, and the work’s *auratic* dimension is a powerful surrogate for the phenomenological sense of proximity inspired by indexical records; (3) we are aware of the speed with which David drew his subject, passing swiftly before his friend’s window at Rue Sainte-Honoré, and the velocity of the representation must have affected the author’s mentation towards producing a first-catch depiction; (4) the drawing is without competition from other counterfactual representations. If we accept that these are good reasons for accepting that

(a) David’s drawing grants the viewer epistemic access to the last moments of Marie Antoinette;

(b) the drawing offers epistemic resilience against any other interpretation of the facts involved;

and (c) the drawing may be submitted to interrogations that would be pointless to ask in face of other representations, namely indexical questions such as those concerning the exact geographical position of David and Marie Antoinette at the time the drawing was being made,

then you are closer to admit that documentaries based on non-indexical records may also share that “special capacity to undermine themselves” we find in the more prototypical Observational Documentaries.

Second, when you consider the thought that in proper trace-based documentaries “meaning passes from image to narrative”, and no matter how loosely you interpret this formula, it seems clear that what is suggested is that meaning originates *ex* photograph and then fully determines the film’s form and content - including stylistic options - overshadowing any initial hypothesis, previously researched historical testimonies, scientific argument, etc. Again, what ultimately justifies this bold consequence is the fact that we cannot find inconsistencies in testimony-based films or films that are not fully determined by their photographic traces, as are those involving dramatic reconstructions of the historical past.²⁸ If this *viewing affordance* is not inherently present, then these kinds of film drift closer to the category of fiction film since the trace content never fails to cohere with the

²⁸ This is an argument reinforced in Currie’s most recent version of his theory: “Deception is often possible in such cases because of the presumption we have that, when the documentary is telling us something controversial, it will do so, unless there is indication to the contrary, with the aid of images the trace contents of which reflect the claims being made (...). Accounts of documentary that do not make the idea of a trace central to the concept cannot accommodate this important fact about documentary.” (Currie, “Documentary traces,” 100).

narrative. Moreover, it is projected not to conflict with the narrative, something that negates the main epistemic peculiarity of proper documentary: to be either revelatory or deceptive. But surely, inconsistencies may also be discovered in testimonies and objective theses can be falsified independently of the medium used to convey them, if we employ the valid standards for correction and objectivity. If we remove the “special” from the formula that characterizes documentaries as having a “special capacity to undermine themselves”²⁹ we get closer to an account that perceives documentaries, more generally, as film that prescribes an assertive stance (the relational view) or, more specifically, as film that affords the spectator with a falsifying experience (by asking “might it be lying?”).

Also, when you start imagining the spectator’s phenomenology presumed in this account, something of a *reductio ad absurdum* pops in your mind. It is being assumed that (a) trace-based films hold that affective quality that makes us *feel* specially connected to the represented fact, *and* that (b) they afford the spectator the chance to assess the coherence level between the evidence offered by the photographic trace and the explanation elaborated by the narrative. However, these two attitudes *vis-à-vis* the film seem to lead to contradictory consequences because there seems to be an incompatibility between the phenomenological appeal of the documentary and the fact that we are led to assess the congruence between trace and narrative. On the one hand, the spectator that *loses* herself in contemplation of the event as such will doubtfully be willing and able to engage on an interrogative concern about the film’s veridical coherence. On the other hand, the spectator that adopts the inquisitive attitude immediately prescribed by any film that includes traces will not remain an absorbed witness to the quasi-event being presented. Also, once

²⁹ Currie, “Documentary traces,” 291.

that inquisitive attitude is adopted why should the narrative be the only segment under scrutiny? Why should the trace itself remain immune to the spectator's interpretative powers? Why can't this be the segment that "might be lying", as in the case of Nanook's false fishing scene?

Third, there is the question concerning the higher degree of objectivity attributed to trace-determined films. Photographic images are said to be more "reliable". However, photographic images that can be perfectly objective and reliable if taken "at the canonical level of description"³⁰ specified by the narrative, can be deceiving if scrutinized under another, say, more literal level of description. This is the case in many documentaries that are filled with stock-footage shots that don't exactly command or are even strictly related to the narrative. For instance, a documentary on the role of the Sherman tank during the Second World War may narrate at one point that we are seeing a "Sherman tank in Normandy", which is the canonical level of description set out by the narrative, while the image being shown is revealed at the literal level of description as constituting stock-footage of a Sherman tank filmed in Germany.³¹ How "reliable" is that? And given the sudden importance granted to the narrative as responsible for establishing the proper description level under which we are to assess the degree of coherence between trace and narrative, is the flow of meaning still running from trace to narrative?

³⁰ Currie, "Documentary traces," 103.

³¹ Noël Carroll, "Photographic traces and documentary films: Comments for Gregory Currie," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58-3 (2000). For an expanded view of this criticism, cf. Jinhee Choi, "A reply to Gregory Currie on documentaries", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59: 3, Summer 2001, 59:3.

You may consider the reply that there are different grades of narrative correspondence and that as long as the trace content corresponds to the canonical level of description established by the narrative the spectator is perfectly capable of tolerate failures of correspondence.³² Taking the example above, in view of the overarching narrative, and as long as the tank shown is a Sherman, its image constitutes a reliable trace without awakening any concern about its specific location. This response, however, poses two problems. First, it seems to run against that special potential for incongruity that can only be found in documentaries that are based on the fact that traces cannot be subjugated by narrative, and whose presumptive possibility induces spectators to contrast what is being shown to what is being told. Apparently, this is only true at some level because the discovery that the Sherman tank is not located in Normandy is not part of the unexpected findings that turn the viewing of documentaries particularly rich and phenomenologically distinct (*vis-à-vis* fiction viewing). What is even more intriguing is that it is up to the narrative, and not the trace, to determine what the “canonical level description” is and - oddly enough - what are the inconsistencies to which the spectator should be attentive (that the tank is not a Sherman), and those that she should disregard (that the location is Germany and not Normandy). Thus, it seems that it is not only the meaning but also the spectator’s cognition that is being heavily conditioned by the narrative. Second, this view dismisses the kind of films Bill Nichols classified as “performative documentaries” consisting mainly of re-enactments and performances.³³ According to this view, if considered *qua* documentaries, then these films should be viewed as being *of* the “performances” that took place before the camera and not *about* the events to which

³² Currie, “Documentary traces,” 103.

³³ Cf. Plantinga, “What a documentary is,” 109.

they are related. But in a way the footage of the Sherman tank in Germany is not *of* the “Sherman tank in Normandy” but *about* the “Sherman tank in Normandy”. It is *being used to represent* a “Sherman tank in Normandy” the same way that the body of a given actor may be *used to represent* Napoleon in a reconstitution of the battle of Waterloo. In fact, they both open up two layers of representation – by use and by origin - which defies our initial assumption that documentaries should be entirely based on visual traces. Therefore, why should an historical re-enactment be treated differently from the stock-footage of a Sherman tank in Germany since neither constitutes an actual trace of the significant objects or events? And if narrative is the responsible for establishing that the Sherman tank footage be accepted in a more coarse-grained level of analysis can’t it also calibrate the level of analysis with which the spectator interprets the performative documentary? By allowing the narrative to impact on the perspective with which the spectator regards each shot, you are forced to conclude that the meaning of each shot should be decided in light of the film as a whole and not the other way around and this implies that one should always bear in mind the overarching intentionally produced narrative.

You concentrate again on the film being shown on the TV. Although the film still defies classification it could easily be placed under the category of Observational Documentaries. It exemplifies the awe unique to that sense of intimacy that constitutes one of the clearly distinctive traits of trace-based documentaries. Although the author is not showing us any people, the spectator cannot help but feeling that there are many stories surrounding all those abandoned objects and empty rooms. The uninhabited space conjures the feeling of a presence just like the apparent disappearance of the author makes her presence even more prominent. Imagine now that someone else would turn this wandering set of scenes into a fiction film via a

voice-over narration of a story about colonial India.³⁴ Visual traces would still determine the diegetic path but the film could no longer be classifiable as a documentary. You conclude that there are many ways in which film traces can determine the narrative and you still lack sufficient criteria for deciding what is the correct manner of deriving such a narrative. Even further, this shows you that these criteria cannot be derived simply from the film traces precisely because they are non-doxastic in nature and thus epistemologically neutral, and may support different types of narratives. Thus, if we assume that these criteria do exist then we have to look for them in that which induces the spectator into adopting the sort of evaluative viewing – in particular, the search for inconsistencies between film traces and whatever the author “may believe and / or want us to believe”³⁵ – that is characteristic of documentaries. This is exactly the interface that binds together a realist theory like the one you are considering and the view that documentaries are simply another way of producing veridical assertions, triggering the same kind of attitude and meaning-extraction tools that spectators use in their daily life. The assertive force both theories recognize in documentaries³⁶ manifests itself in the way the connection between film trace and narrative was designed, so as to allow the spectator to assess the level of coherence between traces and narrative.

B.2. *Telling*: the Relational View

³⁴ This is a variation on the example of “My own Vietnam” proposed in Carroll, “Photographic traces,” 305.

³⁵ Currie, “Documentary traces,” 291.

³⁶ Cf. Currie, “Documentary traces,” 103.

Some of the most promising contemporary approaches to film theory partake the idea that watching a film is very much like following a conversation or trying to make sense of someone else's behavior.³⁷ When you go out to the movies or whenever you zap your way through the cable channels in your hotel room, you are aware that you are watching the product of several intentional agents (directors, photographers, actors, stage designers, etc.). Thus, you are spontaneously led to activate the daily cognitive tools you normally use to attribute mental states to the people with which you interact. In a way it is a process similar to that of making sense of a conversation in which a certain event is described. By assessing your interlocutor's intentions, you use your experienced ability to integrate that round of information relatively aware that it may include distortions, ellipses, ambiguities and false clues.³⁸ Your reception and interpretation of the film is constituted, to a large extent, by the way you spontaneously reconstruct the *intentional agenda* that framed its origin. Therefore, no matter how diverse the reception of a film may be, it remains nevertheless true that the original intentions behind the film constitute an external criterion for judging which ways of watching the film are valid and fair, and which are not. A fairer reception and interpretation of the film will make the viewer's attribution of mental states to the author look more plausible and the viewer's propensity to attribute a more and more rich set of intentions to the author improves her powers of interpretation – even if some (probably most) attributions are later abandoned as incongruent. The fact that spectators are often involved in this kind of

³⁷ Cf. Francis Sparshott, "Vision and Dream in the Cinema," *Philosophic Exchange* (1971); Alessandro Pignocchi, *Pourquoi aime-t-on un film?*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 2015.

³⁸ Sparshott, "Vision and dream," 121.

intention detection and response explains why so many of the terms we use to evaluate film are intentional concepts: “sincere”, “subtle”, “heavy”, “light”, “pretentious”, “didactic”, “bold”, etc.³⁹ Now, some of these intentions are attributed in face of the film’s diegetic content and provide the audience with a basis for drawing semantic meaning from that object. You may call them meaning or authorial intentions. Other intentions, however, relate to the indexing of the film, or the kind of viewing attitude the audience recognizes as being intended by the author through the intentions that establish the category of the film: the categorical intentions. The first kind of intentions is recognized and attributed to the author in the course of the viewer’s reception and interpretation of the film and affect the film’s hermeneutics. They comprise items such as the author’s political, moral or philosophical views, the rationale behind some character’s psychology or the plausibility of some allegorical interpretative reading. The second kind of intentions determines the film’s ontology, meaning that they establish the category to which the film belongs and therefore prescribe a given viewing stance. There are two fundamental viewing stances easily apprehensible on a coarse-grained reading of the film: the fictive stance and the imaginative stance. The fact that documentaries are so viewed because they are related to their author’s categorical intention means that their status is established by a *relational quality* and not by a manifest property, such as trace dependency.⁴⁰

³⁹ Cf. Pignocchi, *Pourquoi*, 26.

⁴⁰ The distinction between theories of art based on manifest or relational properties of the objects involved can be traced back to Maurice Mandelbaum’s seminal paper “Family Resemblances and Generalizations concerning the Arts,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965). For a detailed criticism of the way relational theories of art were presented as a suitable comprehensive alternative to the family resemblance theory of art, cf. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, “Relational Theories of Art: the History of an Error,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 52-2 (2012): 141-151.

Relational properties are those properties that connect a given object to something else, like the intentions surrounding its creation. In the case of documentaries, the relevant property is that of having been created by someone for some actual audience with the intention that the audience recognizes the film as an assertion (as opposite to a supposition). In other words, documentaries are projected to establish a specific kind of relation with their viewers, appealing not to their imagination (as fiction films do) but to their powers of epistemic evaluation.⁴¹ Whenever you wish to communicate some information to someone else, you make manifest that information (there is an *informative intention*) but you also transmit an intention of transmitting such information in a given manner (a *communicative intention*).⁴² Part of this communicative intention is composed of cues that will allow your respondent to recognize the way in which you wish her to respond to that information, and namely whether you wish her to take it as a supposition or as an assertion, in other words, to which speech category the text belongs (the *categorical intention*). Film is an intentional communicative device. The audience's response is

⁴¹ The shift from a theory of manifest properties of film to an account based upon relational characteristics seems to parallel a similar shift in philosophy of art, from traditional theories seeking an essentialist definition of art to theories that looked for the identification of artistic phenomena by selecting a relational property common to all those phenomena. Inspired by Nicholas Wolterstorff's theory of projected worlds, Carl Plantinga proposed a definition of nonfiction film as the category in which a filmmaker makes "an assertive stance toward the world projected by the film" (Plantinga, "What a documentary is," 107). Using the speech act theory, Plantinga argued that as soon as a film is recognized as a documentary, this "mobilizes relevant expectations on the part of the audience". This discovery of a defining relational property based on a Gricean intention-response model of communication was then further developed by Trevor Ponech and especially by Noël Carroll.

⁴² Cf. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, "Pragmatics, modularity and mind-reading," in *Mind and Language*, 17 (1-2) (2002).

activated mainly through the recognition of the author's categorical intention but for this to be successful the author also has to include a *reflective component* by which she gives reasons as to why the audience should engage with the content in the prescribed way. The categorical intention is commonly conveyed through the film's previous *indexing* (e.g., the fact that you are watching this film on the *History* or *AXN* channels means that you are probably watching a documentary or a fiction film) and in the majority of cases moviegoers are *a priori* aware of the kind of film they are about to watch.

The fictive and the imaginative stances constitute two different *viewing protocols* that significantly filter the spectator's overall expectation and attitude towards the film, basically telling her what to look for and what kinds of questions she should be asking in order to make sense of the film. In view of the author's cues and indexing, if the spectator adopts a fictive stance *vis-à-vis* the film, she activates her "suppositional imagination" and considers the film's propositional content as a license to imagine instead of a prescription for belief. On the other hand, the acknowledgment that the author has prepared the film under the intention that it should be considered through the adoption of an assertive stance triggers proper belief in the film's "meaning bearing signs" and prevents the viewer from suppositionally imagine that meaning.⁴³

It should be noted that the relevant relational property in this account resides not in the spectator's adopted relation to the film but rather in the author's "assertoric intention" that a given film be taken as a "putative fact" and was as such planned and

⁴³ This is what identifies the class of films that Noël Carroll names "film of presumptive assertion" a category in between "nonfiction film" (a broader class that includes non-assertive films such as *Serene Velocity*) and "documentaries" (cf. Carroll, "Fiction, non-fiction," 185).

filmed. It is then the relation between the film and this assertoric intention that is significant and this connection remains a defining characteristic of the film irrespective of the circumstance – perfectly admissible - that viewers may not be able to determine the viewing stance in which the film was supposed to be interpreted.⁴⁴ The ontological demarcation of this category of films is not affected by the epistemological problems that may prevent spectators from adopting the intended attitude. Therefore, the fact that you are still unsure of the kind of film you're watching does not affect the fact that the film was conceived with the intention of being watched in a given way.

The fictional intention is particularly effective in distinguishing fictional film from other kinds of film. But if we look now at the multifarious domain that is open up by the assertoric intention we realize that a specific difference is required in order to set apart documentary film within the larger genus of “film of presumptive assertion”. After all, propaganda film or Ms. Smith’s video of her trip to Rome also seem to share an assertoric intention. The specific difference is to be found in the special kind of objectivity that may be attributed to documentary film – and that too is a relational quality.

The discrimination between the two possible representational layers of film (representation-by-origin and representation-by-use) and its stylistic qualities *qua* depiction do not suffice to characterize documentaries because the author is free to

⁴⁴ This deflects a common objection (e.g., Plantinga, “What a documentary is,” 108) according to which Carroll’s definition makes the audience’s response a necessary condition for categorizing any film and therefore if the audience would fail to recognize the assertive stance, then the film would not qualify as a documentary.

manipulate all three components in her project: none of them is intrinsically alien to assertion. What distinguishes documentary film within the class of films with an assertoric intention is an intended commitment to “the standards of argument, evidence and exposition” that are valid for the kind of information it presents.⁴⁵ Those standards may include the criteria used in the respective scientific domain (History or Cosmology, for instance) for assessing the information being conveyed. It does not matter whether this commitment is sealed on the basis of trace evidences of the events, as in the case of Observational Documentaries, or whether it is assumed through historical re-enactments, digital imaging, or voiced testimonies, as in the case of Expository Documentaries. An important assumption here is that non-fiction film is capable of meeting the same criteria for objectivity that are met by non-fiction writing. Once a film is indexed as objective non-fiction the viewer is prompted to use the same relevant standards of evidence and argument and the same intersubjective criteria for assessing the data selection and interpretations proposed by the author.

When you start comparing this view to the realist theory based on the centrality of traces, a relational theory of this kind seems to offer a better explanation of what documentaries are on at least three accounts. First, it presents a relational property that seems to be valid throughout the extraordinary variety of films under that label. Moreover, it is this relational property (the assertoric objective intention) that explains the family resemblances one may find among the many diverse instances of documentary film, especially in cases where no common manifest properties (like trace-dependency) exist. They manage to explain why some manifest similarities exist between films A and B (e.g., that they both have a strong documental basis with photographic traces leading the way to the narrative), and between films B and C

⁴⁵ Cf. Carroll, “From real to reel,” 242.

(e.g., that they both present dramatized reenactments of events), but not between films A and C, although they all belong to the same film category. This is an *explanatory advantage*.

Second, they manage to identify a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that rule over the application of the concept. What matters here is not just the fact that documentaries are identified within a framework of cultural institutions and communication practices but rather that documentaries, and documentaries alone, stand in a unique relation to that framework, precisely the trait that the relational theory is able to define.⁴⁶ And this is a *definitional advantage*.

Third, as you already detected, a realist theory is more vulnerable to counterexamples, not only coming from instances already in the extension of what we commonly call “documentaries” but also from an unsuspected range of films that may emerge in the future. As Bill Nichols’ taxonomy shows, what today counts as documentary is already extremely heterogeneous. This heterogeneity should prepare us for the fact that what counts as “documentary” today is probably going to change over time. As a matter of fact, back in 1995, Brian Winston was already predicting

⁴⁶ Particularly since they draw our attention to the tutorial role that “indexing” plays in guiding, or at least predisposing, the spectator’s attention, relational theories of documentary attribute a fundamental role to the framing of the film. A double framing, to be precise, since the genre “documentary” is defined by appealing to two contextual frameworks, first the categorical context, i.e., the assignment of film to the assertive stance – ranging from full awareness of the author’s assertive intention to the varied practices that assist the indexing of films (e.g., the fact that it is being shown in a specific cable channel) – and then the epistemic context, i.e., the set of standards of correction valid for the scientific domain in which the film is inscribed. Now, the fact documentaries are so regarded out of a complex crisscross of institutions and practices is not enough for a proper definition. In fact, a family resemblance theory of documentary film could be offered on the same basis.

that the introduction of digital imaging would bring the “documentary project” to an end by destroying the indexical evidence of the cinematography (its trace-dependency) and consequently the “lexical bond” between spectators and documentaries.⁴⁷ Relational theories hold this advantage over realist theories that they seem to fare better with the fact that unforeseeable counterexamples to the definition may arise in the future. It does so by accommodating the fact that the manifest qualities of documentaries are essentially changeable: they will change in the future and we simply cannot predict what documentary practices are yet to be invented.⁴⁸ Call this a *latitudinarian advantage*.

However, there seems to be a tension between the ability to explain and the ability to leave open the future admission of documentaries by way of not stipulating what their manifest properties might be.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Winston, “Claiming the real,” 6.

⁴⁸ Consider the case of a film such as *Face* (2013) by German media artist Christoph Korn. The artist used the remaining 23-minute fragment of *Terezin: A Documentary Film of the Jewish Resettlement*, a propaganda film made by the Nazis in 1944, decelerated it several times and turned it into a 12-hour film with a soundtrack consisting of a conversation between the artist himself and producer Antoine Beuger. This artistic strategy accomplishes two things. First, it stretches the visual traces of the original footage to unprecedented levels and intensifies the viewer’s phenomenological connection to the 1944 events. The title *Face* is justified because both the prisoners’ and their guards’ faces, both meant to be mere examples serving a propagandistic function, acquire a clear protagonism when observed in slow motion. Second, it turns the viewer’s attention to a sort of meta-documental level by making manifest the temporal gaps and holes that affect the apparent homogeneous structure of the original film, a novel insight into the propaganda production system.

⁴⁹ Neill and Ridley enumerate three requirements to be met by any definition of open concepts: the explanatory, the conditions and the openness requirement (“Relational theories,” 146-148). They also

It is harder for a relational theory to provide the sense of closure we look for in a proper definition, if compared to a realist theory based on manifest properties. A realist theory is also an essentialist theory, which means that once a manifest property is tracked down as permeating the entire extension of tokens of a given concept, it becomes the necessary condition that sustains such a concept. If that same manifest property is also exclusive of the members of that set, then it is also the condition that suffices to segregate them from the rest of the items in the universe. The explanation is closed. But relational theories don't work like that. They consider, for instance, that the conceptual and institutional framework of film is a more fundamental factor for its proper identification than the nature of film as film.⁵⁰ This is in part justified by recognizing that there is no unique manifest property common to all the items within the concept's extension - not even trace dependency. All there is, at best, are some *family resemblances* between phenomena and under that metaphor trace-dependency is just like "the nose of the Robinsons": you may find its anatomic configuration in most members of the Robinson family (maybe even in all the members *you know*) but surely not in all of them nor only in them. What is required then is that we find out a feature that is *responsible* for all the patterns of similarity that have been drawn between the items within the concept's extension. It is not enough to find yet another pattern of similarity albeit a more pervasive one, like the property that authors produce documentaries with the intention that viewers acknowledge them as assertions and thereby use relevant standards to assess the quality of that assertion. In order for the explanation to count, one has to show that that feature is what makes us draw attention to the contradiction between the explanatory and the openness requirement in relational theories of art.

⁵⁰ Carroll, "From real to reel," 245.

use the concept *in the first place* and *then* look out for possible similarities between the items underneath it. However, in order to do so, a relational theory of documentary would have to refer, sooner or later, to the manifest properties of film, and show, for instance, how that relational feature causes a given manifest trait. For example, the fact that photographic traces are so often dominant in documentaries is because they are a powerful way of communicating that an assertion is at stake. However, if this is carried out, then the relational theory no longer fits that latitudinarian advantage we were praising before. In order to be open to future developments in documentary practices, the theory should be quite *agnostic* in respect to present or future manifest properties of documentaries. It should not even mention them if it wishes to remain compatible with any properties that “documentaries” have or may acquire in the future, and indeed compatible with any similarity pattern that may be found among them.⁵¹ If the relational theory falls under the temptation of pronouncing a connection between the relational property and the manifest properties, and starts adding more details about actual documentaries, then it is already jeopardizing its chances of accommodating future developments of the genre. But if it does resist, then it fails to provide a proper explanation of the way we go about applying such a concept. Explanation leads to constriction and openness leads to fuzziness. Thus, we cannot have a relational theory of documentaries that is both explanatory and open to future developments.

The abstinence to consider questions about the nature of film as film, namely through the assessment of its manifest properties, also makes it possible to draw a

⁵¹ Cf. Neill and Ridley, “Relational theories,” 148.

parallel between objective assertive film and written essays or scientific papers.⁵² But given this parallel, why should one prefer to use film to communicate veridical assertions instead of writing a book or publishing a paper? You can't provide an answer to this question unless you start referring to the manifest properties of film. On the other hand, if you resist making that reference, then you fail to explain the possible appeal of assertive film because one may argue that, for the most part, the potential audience that is fully aware of the standards of correction required for assessing the objective assertive film content would rather weigh that information in scientific books or articles.

C. Show and Tell

The film is over and you switch off the TV. While you lie in your bed with your eyes shut you go back to your previous question: was that fiction or nonfiction? However seductive, its artistic character did not erase the two dimensions that attract you to documentaries. First, the phenomenological appeal (some) documentaries have and, second, the assertive value of the genre that makes you ask whether what you're watching is indeed true or not. The realist account of documentaries explained you why the first is so important and the relational account made it clear why the second dimension cannot be dismissed. Interestingly, however, the objections you raised against each of them present them as complementary theories of documentary. They both agree that the spectator's proper response to documentaries involves a kind of

⁵² “[...] [N]onfiction films can be and are supposed to be objective in the same sense that nonfiction writing is.” (Carroll, “From real to reel,” 236).

falsificatory assessment: “Might it be lying?” This is prompted either because trace-based intention-independent representations offer “nonconceptually mediated contents”⁵³ against which spectators are able to judge the level of coherence of the narrative, or because the audience responds to the author’s assertoric intention. If you remove all the questionable aspects of the realist view, there are two interconnected intuitions that seem to remain true: (a) that documentaries afford the possibility of unexpected findings and (b) that documentaries may deceive. If you transfer these two characteristics to the context of a relational theory you may come to the conclusion that the epistemic tension between what is being shown and what is being told is arguably the most important cue through which the author’s assertoric intention is conveyed. In a way, what lies at the core of that intention is not exactly an assertion (“This is true”) but a question (“Is this true?”). We owe to the images’ epistemic resilience – the fact that they may resist against and disprove erroneous interpretations and narratives - the possibility of examining documentaries by splitting them into two representational levels: what is actually shown – the representation-by-origin or physical portrayal – and what is intentionally meant – the representation-by-use or nominal portrayal. Playing with this split – first of all, making it stand – is arguably the best way to prompt the viewer into assessing the information being conveyed, namely by using appropriate standards of objectivity. The difference here, however, is that, unlike the realist account, there is no reason to grant the trace with a heavier epistemological weight *vis-à-vis* the narrative, or take it to be the final standard of correction.

⁵³ Gregory Currie, “Preserving the Traces: An Answer to Noël Carroll,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 58:3 (2000): 307.

The sense of phenomenological proximity is a key component of the photograph's epistemic resilience, which in turn is a fundamental component of the viewer's quest for falsification. But now think of a documentary without anything remotely similar to a photographic trace of the relevant events, not even photographic traces of the locations and people that were the background of the events.⁵⁴ In what way could it lead to unexpected findings or "self-defeat"? The realist theory was quite convincing in showing that a major factor of the documentary's potential for self-defeat lies in the way photographic images retain a "distinctive epistemic power" that holds against any possible narrative and may be subjected to inquiries that would be pointless to make in the case of non-indexical records.⁵⁵ It is this epistemic quality that induces in the viewer that phenomenological sense of "being there". But you have tried a doxastic explanation of the sense of phenomenological proximity of photographs that makes it possible to extend this sense beyond the realm of indexical records. And if you succeed in extending that sense of intimacy you also manage to extend the viewer's quest for falsification to the realm of Expository Documentaries, including docudrama and historical reenactments. If you accept that such epistemic power is, above all, something of which the viewer is convinced based on good reasons, then you may also want to widen the range of good reasons that may induce phenomenological proximity and epistemic resilience. They would include the fact that photographs are natural counterfactual representations of events that would register any minute change in the event being represented, but also the fact that

⁵⁴ Cf. Currie, "Documentary traces," 101.

⁵⁵ Cf. Currie, "Preserving the traces," 308: "Close inspection of some piece of film shot that day in Dallas may shed light on where the fatal shot was fired from: nothing comparable is true concerning an image based on reconstruction."

standards of correction, before constituting assessment criteria, are guidelines that assist and are tested throughout the film's production.

Before you fall asleep you notice how the judicial metaphor abounds when it comes to explain the nature of documentary film. People talk about photographic traces as evidences and of intentional representations, such as historical records, as testimonies. No doubt, this is explained by the fact that documentaries hold the possibility of unexpected findings because they can be subjected to objective questions that would be senseless to ask in view of fictional film ("How heavy was the tank?", "How many shooters were there?"). But also, because they ignite the falsificatory inquiry of viewers, exerting their powers for detecting errors, mistakes and deceptions.

However, if you think through the analogy then maybe it would be better to compare documentaries to court simulations in the way they seem to bring together, in weighed proportion, actual traces and the narrative reconstruction of the event. The reenactment of a murder scene, for instance, offers the chance of comparing distinct testimonies, which get to be clarified, falsified or proved right. Traces are often used in this process and their relative significance is established by weighing them against the narrative composed on the basis of other sources. Some traces, such as fingerprints or bloodstains, are irreplaceable, while others may be replaced, like a missing gun substituted by a similar model. The production of the reenactment may be itself revelatory and unexpected findings may occur though the crisscross of traces and testimonies – the exact trajectory of a bullet in a murder scene, for instance. And a situation where sudden discoveries may occur – whatever their cause may be - induces a sense of closeness to the actual state of affairs that fosters the jury's judicative powers.

Peacefully but inexorably, your own judicative powers abandon you as you now drift to sleep.

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