ATLAS
VIRTUAL ROUND TABLE
MESA REDONDA VIRTUAL

What is Documentary?
O que é o Documentário?

Mohanad Yaqubi

The best part is when the filmmaker realize 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 intentions, 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?

Dario Cecchi

I believe all cinema is a creative treatment of actuality. When a film makerfilmmaker deals with footage, those images are the actuality. No matter how the frame and the stage were previously organized, images will overcome the filmmaker's intentionality.

Therefore, cinema is not a creative *act* it is a creative *treatment* of images. Dziga Vertov represents the transformation of the single frames contained by the film into a short sequence, e.g. the movement of a child who smiles: it is a scene of the *Man with a Movie Camera*. But this is true in all cases, either no matter if you realize fiction or documentary.

Marie Voignier

Le cinéma, documentaire ou non, est pour moi 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.

Dario Cecchi

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 induced to consider images as documents that are available to new investigations.
Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujca applied this principle to their documentary about the fall of the Communist regime in Romania, *Videograms of a Revolution*. They assemble together videos of the upheaval against the Romanian dictator Ceausescu. They show his and his wife's arrest, trial and sentence to death. These videos were produced by both the State TV channel and independent video makers. The voice off 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 bythrough 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 produce other films. I would speak of creative treatments of images that produce other creative treatments of images.

Raed Rafei

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." [iii]

[iii] Uriel Orlow, "The Archival Power of the Image," in *Lost in the Archives* (Toronto, CA: Alphabet City, 2002), https://urielorlow.net/publication/chris-marker-the-archival-power-of-the-image/.

Marie Voignier

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.

Raed Rafei

I see documentary filmmaking as a craft where filmmakers mold and work their stories as if they're 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's 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.

Nguyen Trinh Thi

The question then is that whether you stretch the definition of documentary so it can include your work, or just drop it (documentary) and just to find some other terms that are a bit more inclusive.

At the beginning of my "career" as a filmmaker, or documentary filmmaker some 15 years ago (my first career was being a journalist), I was interested in making observational or direct cinema. However, I wasn't completely interested in following the "rules" of observational cinema, such as that you shouldn't do interviews in direct cinema. Increasingly, I felt quite free in creating my own forms. So for the lack of terms, I started to call my films "experimental documentary". And more recently, I use other terms like essay films, hybrid films, or moving image more often.

Christa Blümlinger

La première question serait de savoir s'il s'agit vraiment d'un genre quand nous parlons du documentaire.

Pour échapper aux à ce genre de 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.

Nguyen Trinh Thi

The "creative treatment of actuality" that John Grierson talked about has taken over in unlimited/unpredictable ways in my own documentaries.
At stake I think is what balance each filmmaker decides for him/herself between depicting "the real" / reality/ facts / actuality and how much they get "treated".

I think the art is the balance, and negotiations between these untreated materials of the real and the treatment of the author. However, when I say "untreated materials", it just means "untreated" in a relative way, because everytime every time you have a person behind a camera, you already got a treatment.

To me, a "creative treatment" equals to a fictionalization of a reality. However, in my experience, the term "documentary" has seemed to maintain this illusion of "objectivity" among the regular audience. I don't think the regular audience are aware enough how, for example, the shooting, and especially the editing process can actually fictionalizes, or "creatively treats", footages of actuality/reality. "Subjectivity" and "fictionalization" to me are actually not very far from each other. So if you accept that subjectivity is an inseparable part of documentary, then a division between documentary and fiction doesn't really make sense.

Mohanad Yaqubi

It happens that I often work with first feature film directors, and funnily enough, none of them had graduated from conventional film schools, and what I noticed that they all have in common, is this recurring question of what a film is. At their beginnings, thesetheir films are never determined to beas 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, and rather it becomes a segment in a narrative, layered with multiple realities, a complex of possibilities in time.

Catarina Mourão

Estamos bem longe da definição de Documentário de John Grierson, como "tratamento criativo da actualidade", na medida em que 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.

Mohanad Yaqubi

What is actuality? Is it a circle or is it a square? [i] Is it a moment or a contest? Is it what happens in front of your eyes or in a YouTube video? Can we see, let's say for example, *Moana*, as a reflection of Moana's reality, or of Flaherty's perspective? [ii] 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 with added sound?

If we were to use these questions to look at the history of exploration films which somehow are considered as the origin of the documentary film, films such as *Moana*, *Nanook*, *90° South*, *Kon-Tiki*, among others, intend to explore geographies which "humans" didn't reachhave not reached before, playing with the idea of an unexplored territory as the intention of the filmmaker.
Meanwhile, when looking at the political context of the time, a wave of hyperhighly aggressive colonial expansions were spreading around the world, looking for the extra territory, awaiting to be claimed. These origins of "documentary" reflect in many ways the 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.

These tools of colonial exploitation, that becamewhich have constituted the "origin" of the documentary film, need to be revisited, decolonized, before it can be given back to the colonized, but without the imposed sound. Furthermore, a process of filmmaking needs to be introduced that is free from such capitalist and emancipated from thesoundtrack that was imposed to it. Furthermore, filmmaking needs to be emancipated from the prevailing capitalis relation to the image that disconnects the maker from the final work, which is a necessity in ordermeans to seize control of time, and therefore, reality.

[i] *In the Year of the Pig*, Emile de Antonio, (104 min, 1968)
[ii] *Moana*, Robert Flaherty, 1926

David LaRocca

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.

Ilana Feldman

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.

Raed Rafei

I think at a time of fake news and post-truth, this tension between the two conflicting poles of documentary (capturing an objective reality/ subjective mediation or transmission) is more relevant than ever. I believe that documentary filmmakers need to abide by principles of justice, fairness and transparency to shed light on forgotten or marginalized communities and issues affecting them. So, I do stand by the duty of documentary makers to uphold social justice.

David LaRocca

A contest between human temperament and computational prowess: the former has to contend with its capacity for detecting fakery, while the latter is revved up and already delivering endless quantities of it.
In this contemporary era that couples high-resolution imagery and computational representation, we may be best off thinking in this double register. For one thing, we can retain our confidence in "films of presumptive assertion" as documentary in nature, while also being cognizant of slippages and deviations from that standard. In this respect, Grierson's "creative treatment of actuality" functions at once as a description and a reminder. Yet what lurks behind the human pairing of image and illustration is a more daunting future in which artificial intelligence begins to assemble the accumulated audiovisual record (our "historical documents") to tell its own story of human existence. A.I. is already composing novels and screenplays and journalism, why not a feature fiction and a documentary to boot?

Volker Pantenburg

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".

Nguyen Trinh Thi

In making documentaries, I'm interested in trying to transmit the experiences and perceptions I have of a certain "reality". So obviously this has to be more or less subjective. I don't think we can perceive a totally objective reality anyway. The filmmaker thus become a medium that helps transmit this "reality", or experiences of this reality, to the audience. I address the tension inherent to documentary formats as you mentioned in the first question, "What is documentary?", by embracing it, making it transparent, regularly reminding the audience of it -- that they're watching a subjective experience of a reality, avoiding to maintain the illusion that documentary is objective; revealing the film-making process and my own identity…etc.
Similarly, in journalism there is a genre named "subjective journalism". Experiences and perceptions of a reality for me are the subjective reality. And these you can never separate from any reality as we can perceive it.
Therefore I also would also refuse the clear division between documentary and fiction.

Fernão Pessoa Ramos

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 assere 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 fílmica, como sendo aquilo que, paradoxalmente, a determina a partir da circunstância da tomada.

Narimane Mari

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. Edouard 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 et 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 pour accompagner chacun de leur mort, en en oubliant aucun jusqu'au buffle qui les a nourri.
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.