











Phillip Warnell

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



Mohanad Yaqubi

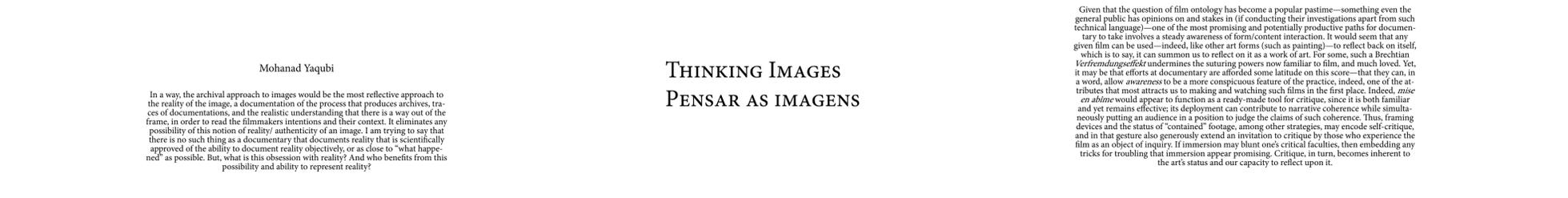
Looking at similarities between archival practices and filmic practices—in some ways, any film is an inventory of an archive, an index of shots. A film performs as a visual catalogue of an archive, an indication to its existence, the original shot. In many ways, the Lumiere brothers’ *Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory in Lyon*, is the first and the last film at the same time. The film and its archive, together, in one shot, and in the same can. The film doesn’t exist outside of its archive, and since the reality of images only exists in its archives, it therefore can only be read from the traces of the archivist, which could be the filmmaker, a film lab, or an activist group. This archiving process—labeling, indexing and categorising—can be considered the meta context, or the reality of a film. A reality that starts when this one film is related to a particular context, such as where it is kept, be it a personal collection, or a corner of a museum archive; we make connections and make a narrative out of it.



Christa Blümlinger

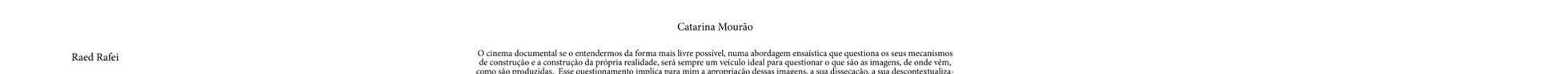
C’est une grande question à laquelle Gilles Deleuze a donné une belle réponse. Il n’y a pas une (seule) forme qui pense. Le cinéma, y compris le documentaire, articulé justement des « blocs d’espace-durée », il n’invente pas de concepts. Quand il ré-enchaîne et retourne les images, quand il produit des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

Ceci dit, il y a aussi une tradition forte de l’avant-garde, née en partie de l’art (post-)conceptuel, se situant entre pensée et cinéma (Hollis Frampton, Morgan Fisher, Werner Nekes, Valie Export ...). Tout récemment, un chercheur américain en cinéma, se présentant à la fois comme philosophe et comme cinéaste, considère que les deux activités séquivalent : ses films seraient de la philosophie par d’autres moyens, dit David N. Rodowick (« Philosophy by other means », conférence au Mass Culture Workshop, 2019, University of Chicago). Par cette affirmation, Rodowick ne vise pas le documentaire, mais ce qu’on appelle la « non-fiction » et un débat concernant depuis quelques décennies déjà la fonction de l’art (contemporain). L’attrait du cinéma d’avant-garde et de l’art contemporain a beaucoup influencé les manières de considérer aujourd’hui le cinéma documentaire. Constatant qu’on invite de nos jours les films de James Benning dans des festivals de documentaire, on peut observer, du côté de la critique et de la diffusion des films, une volonté d’élargir la forme, intégrant des domaines d’expression qui étaient encore largement séparées ou réservées à des niches il y a 20 ans. On revient d’une certaine manière aussi vers des formes premières, quand le cinéma des premiers temps réclamait sa vocation d’enregistrer pour une mémoire du futur et quand l’attention portée au détail et au rythme importait.



Mohanad Yaqubi

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



Raed Raféi

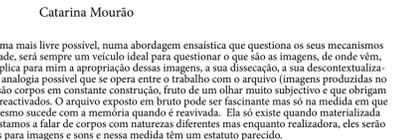
In my new essay film, *Al-Atfal*(The Ruins), I was prompted by a drawing of a Hammam (bathroom) in my hometown of Tripoli that I found in an old travel book from the 1500s by a French traveler. The text describing the Hammam and the image itself were striking in how they gestured towards power dynamics between the West and the Middle East that are still relevant until today. They referenced in particular the complicated power dynamics between patrons of the Hammam, and attendants working there. I decided to reflect on the power of this archival image, itself a mediated representation of a specific experience of the Hammam, by conjuring other modern and not so-modern images and placing them in dialogue with it.



David LaRocca

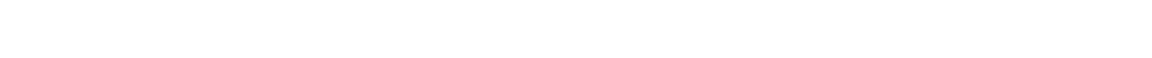
Cinema as a tool of memory? In recent years, films by Joshua Oppenheimer and Rithy Panh come to mind as signal instances of getting us to think about the relationship—purported and otherwise—between mind and memory, memory and media. Where a generation or so ago Alain Resnais and Claude Lanzmann undertook similar experiments (e.g., respectively in *Night and Fog* and *Shoah*), Oppenheimer and Panh have pushed into new territory: the fabrication of facts, enactment and re-enactment, cross-fertilization of genres, de-centering the director-as-*auteur*, extending the number of viable media for storytelling or the expression of memory (e.g., drawings, clay figurines, playing dress-up, etc.). Yet, such territory, however novel, admits of being recognizable to the Griersonian legacy of the “creative treatment of actuality.” And we should not miss the chance to recommend the “creative treatment of possibility,” which is to say the way documentaries can experiment with the future, such as in Kirsten Johnson’s *Dick Johnson is Dead* (2020): here, while human death is assured, the time and manner of death remain unknown. We get grand documentary; reenactments of events (in this case “dying”) that have yet to happen or may never transpire in precisely the ways we see on screen. The very notion of counterfactual is reconceived: alternatives arrive before actualities.

Meanwhile, a different legacy, also familiar to earlier generations—perhaps exemplified by the notion of “bearing witness,” and including the language of primary and secondary witnesses—seems now, in the wake of Oppenheimer, Panh, and others, to be shaken. Oppenheimer and Panh do not present documentary films comprised of footage they took “at the time of” the events they describe (though, to be sure, found footage plays a role). Rather, there is something decidedly present-tense about the works I have in mind (e.g., *The Act of Killing* and *The Missing Picture*). The subjectivity and unreliability of memory itself becomes a central part of their interrogations of the past they address, if not summon. As Emerson once admonished: “[I]live no longer to the expectations of these deceived and deceiving people with whom we converse.” Without any CGI or GAN, Oppenheimer and Panh have done just fine to challenge any lingering hopes for the objectivity of memory and its “capture” on film. While training their attention on undeniable realities—the deaths of thousands of people—they, nevertheless, leave open the *manner* in which the truths of history and memory are rendered. Their films showcase how fact lives in communion with fiction; however troubling to admit, they are tandem enterprises.



Catarina Mourão

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



Raed Raféi

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



Mohanad Yaqubi

In that sense, there is an impossibility in isolating filmmaking as a process from its archival tendencies, it’s actually a tension that many filmmakers face in the making process. Many of them look at film archives as the rushes that are not needed after the film is done. Somehow, rushes are what needs to be forgotten, it exposes the documentary aspect of a fiction, and vice versa. These rushes can tell more about a reality of making a documentary film, since archival practice shows what was not included in the frame, the narrative of the filmmaker. Referencing again my personal experience with first feature directors, with the crucial point being the editing: usually to separate between the film and its archive, and to realize that the film is not its archive, not its reality, that it has its own existence—a new index for the arrangement of the images. Once that happens, working toward building a healthy and mature relationship with the images—giving the space to breath, observing how the dialogue goes between frames—leads to learning how to look at the frame for what it is and not for what it was.

Dario Cecchi

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



David LaRocca

Given that the question of film ontology has become a popular pastime—something even the general public has opinions on and stakes in (if conducting their investigations apart from such technical language)—one of the most promising and potentially productive paths for documentary to take involves a steady awareness of form/content interaction. It would seem that any given film can be used—indeed, like other art forms (such as painting)—to reflect back on itself, which is to say, it can summon us to reflect on it as a work of art. For some, such a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* undermines the suturing powers now familiar to film, and much loved. Yet, it may be that efforts at documentary are afforded some latitude on this score—that they can, in a word, allow *awareness* to be a more conspicuous feature of the practice, indeed, one of the attributes that most attracts us to making and watching such films in the first place. Indeed, *mise en abîme* would appear to function as a ready-made tool for critique, since it is both familiar and yet remains effective; its deployment can contribute to narrative coherence while simultaneously putting an audience in a position to judge the claims of such coherence. Thus, framing devices and the status of “contained” footage, among other strategies, may encode self-critique, and in that gesture also generously extend an invitation to critique by those who experience the film as an object of inquiry. If immersion may blunt one’s critical faculties, then embedding any tricks for troubling that immersion appear promising. Critique, in turn, becomes inherent to the art’s status and our capacity to reflect upon it.