

*THE PHILOSOPHY OF DOCUMENTARY FILM:**IMAGE, SOUND, FICTION, TRUTH*

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Documentary films have not only become increasingly popular in the recent years, they have also attracted more and more attention as a complex subject of academic research and critical study. And indeed, their peculiar relation to reality raises manifold questions: asserting a truthful basis in the real, they push us to reflect on the correspondences between objective facts and their subjective mediation, and confront us with the problem of finding an adequate artistic form for carving a truth content out of the empirical reality. While many rather conventional documentary films aim to reproduce and analyze explicit facts, critical documentaries and essay films often take on a critical stance towards the hegemonic claim for factual truth and the idea of an unbiased representation. Instead of comforting the status quo of that which appears as genuinely real, they examine the underlying power structures of reality and the spectrum of experiences and representations constitutive of it, thereby interrogating the status of images in the contemporary society and their performative force of shaping perception. Thinking with, about and through documentary films, especially those with artistic and critical ambitions, thus leads to a problematizing of our very understanding of the world, the way it is represented and legitimated, and the impact of images and sounds in contemporary society. What do documentary films reveal, scrutinize, or destabilize? How do they make us think not only about specific topics, but also about the form through which they become graspable? How does the interrelation of form and content affect their epistemological dimension and their critical force?

Those and many other essential questions have recently been in the center of several edited volumes: *The Documentary Film Book*, edited by Brian Winston,¹ a rich and complex compilation that brings together 41 outstanding scholars and artists working on the subject of documentary images past and present, and in different geopolitical contexts; *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*, edited by Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Le-

bow Jonathan,² which focuses on particular topics relevant to contemporary non-fiction films through various contributions by mostly female academics; and Jonathan Kahana's impressive 1000 pages anthology *The Documentary Film Reader. History, Theory, Criticism*³ featuring a wide range of highly significant texts, manifests, reviews and essays written throughout the 20th and 21st century, just to name a few.

The Philosophy of Documentary Film: Image, Sound, Fiction, Truth, edited by David LaRocca, constitutes another significant contribution to the subject. As the title indicates, this publication concentrates on the multiple philosophical layers of documentary films rather than approaching its subject matter through specific themes or stylistic features, giving a historical overview of existing theories, or generalizing its characteristics as a genre. The book is divided into five parts, which rather provide a minimal structure than subordinate the individual texts under categories, and preceded by a short foreword by Timothy Corrigan and a comprehensive introduction by David LaRocca. In his presentation of the book's orientation and achievements, he refers to Plato's distinction between poetry (associated with fiction, art, invention, subjectivity and the senses) and philosophy (related to the search for truth), in order to demarcate the two conflicting poles inherent to documentary films. This dual ground — the artistic mediation of reality on the one hand and the claim for truth on the other — as well as the multiple tensions and ambiguities between these two poles, constitutes the nucleus of the publication and informs the aesthetical, metaphysical, epistemological and ethical investigations included in the volume. In this sense, *The Philosophy of Documentary Film* aims not only to explore the relation between reality and the filmic medium and to examine how a truth-value can be attributed to a documentary film, but also to question the strict separation of fact and fiction as such. For while the poetic aspects in documentary films bear the danger of distorting reality and facilitating propaganda and manipulation (e.g., the films of Leni Riefenstahl), they also allow for a critical reassessment of the very concepts of truth, reality and their interrelations, as well as a problematizing of the ethical and political levels of representation. In order to open up a "prismatic perspective on documentary cinema" (44) rather than exclusively concentrating on writings from within the field of philosophy, the editor opted for a "radically inter- and transdisciplinary" (42) approach. Therefore, besides critical texts written by academics from diverse horizons (anthropology, literature, film and communication stu-

dies, philosophy, political theory, and others), the publication includes contributions from documentary filmmakers.

The first part of *The Philosophy of Documentary Film*, entitled “The Medium, Morals and Metaphysics of Documentary Film,” comprises theoretical texts written by acknowledged philosophers and film academics on specific problems concerning the filmic medium in relation to the reality they depict. Some elaborate on general questions of the medium, as Stanley Cavell’s contribution which concentrates on the nature of the photographic image as such, and Noël Carroll’s analyses of the notion of realism after André Bazin. More specifically engaged with the definition of documentary films, Gregory Currie defends his thesis of their necessary inclusion of authentic traces, and Carl Plantinga develops his position — against subjectivist theories — according to which the distinction between fiction and documentary films depends on the “intended function of the film within the cultural context in which the film is produced and viewed” (120). The last contribution in this section, written by Vivian Sobchack, discusses in depth the genuinely ethical question of representing death, and the different effects such a representation triggers in fictional and documentary formats.

The texts assembled in the second part of the book, “Strategies and Styles of Documenting with Film,” focus on particular questions that have been raised in the history of documentary filmmaking, and problematize their apparent objectivity. Thus, Tom Gunning analyses an early form of non-fictional films, the “views,” as a form pretending to simply register empirical reality, while “reveal[ing] the ambiguous power relations of the look so nakedly” (171). The inherent ideological grounding of seemingly “neutral” nature films are examined in Scott MacDonald’s contribution, by confronting the moralistic tendencies of the True-Life Adventure films produced by the Disney Studio with the nature documentaries of Jean Painlevé, which relate to society by taking on a critical stance. While William Rothman retraces Jean Rouch’s idea of “ciné-transe” as a means to penetrate into the reality in question, thus producing a camera-truth through the intervention of the filmmaker, William Day deploys different ways of evoking and experiencing time through documentary films with a special focus on Werner Herzog’s *Cave of the Forgotten Dreams* (2010). Finally, Claudia Pederson and Patricia R. Zimmermann study the alienating strategies towards landscapes and nature in Vincent Grenier’s experimental films.

The third part of the book, “Documentary Theorist-Filmmakers at Work,” includes contributions written by practitioners who also work in the academic field. Ariella Azou-

lay, Diana Allan, Mieke Bal and Bernadette Wegenstein give a critical insight in their own artistic practice and the way it is interwoven with theoretical reflections. In contrast, Dan Geva revisits the praxis and concepts of one of the pioneers of activist documentary filmmaking, Dziga Vertov, as “*ciné-seeing the invisible*” (310), and Elan Gamaker investigates the political and social impacts of aesthetic choices through a critique of early films by Ken Loach and Ken Russell on the housing crisis in the 1960s. The last contribution in this section, written by Selmin Kara, examines the mediation of matter and its virtual and actual strata in Victor Erice’s *El sol del membrillo* (*Dream of Light*, 1992).

“Interventions and Reconstructions of Documentary Modes, Methods and Meanings,” the fourth part of the publication, is maybe the most difficult to grasp as a homogeneous section. It includes different topics and questions, which, furthermore, appear through diverse forms. Thus, it contains critical studies with philosophical implications of particular films: V. F. Perkin’s reassessment of the final scene of Frederick Wiseman’s *High School* (1968), Jennifer L. McMahon’s reading of *Blackfish* (2013), and K. L. Evans’ interpretation of *The Big Short* (2015). It also focuses on certain theories and their reevaluations: Rick Altman surveys the treatment and impact of sound in films and their theorization, and Keith Dromm comments critically on the theories of Carroll, Currie and Plantinga, which leads him to develop an approach to documentary films based on the notion of understanding. Finally, the section also includes “The Dogma 95 Manifesto and Werner Herzog’s *Minnesota Declaration* (1999),” as well as Bill Nichols’ “Letter to Errol Morris.”

The fifth and last part of the book, “Auto/Biography and the Composition of Identity in Documentary Form”, concentrates on portraits, the problem of the self and the different layers of consciousness as constructed through documentary films. Each contribution in this section elaborates the question through a particular film: Michael Fried sensitively analyses the multiple perspectives in *Zidane, un portrait du 21e siècle* (*Zidane: A Twenty-First Century Portrait*, 2006), Garry L. Hagberg immerses into the literary universe of Winfried Sebald and its sensual correspondences with the film *On Patience (After Sebald)* (2012). Both Charles Warren in his text about the intersections of fictional and non-fictional elements in Chantal Akerman’s film, and Linda Williams in her contribution about Michelle Citron’s work address the question of the representation of femininity in audio-visual media. The problem of re-enactment and staging is raised by Karen D. Hoffman’s article on Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* (2012), and David LaRocca’s own contribution

discusses the moral implications of the “false documentary” *I’m Still Here* (2011) about the alleged downfall of the actor Joaquin Phoenix.

In sum, *The Philosophy of Documentary Film* undoubtedly bears witness to the complexity and the density of its subject matter. The texts included in the volume cover a wide range of topics and approaches, and they raise multiple philosophical questions inherent to documentary films. Rather than systematically analyzing specific philosophical aspects or giving a comprehensive overview or a conclusive assessment of philosophical issues in documentary films, the book functions kaleidoscopically: each text sets its own approach. However, despite the explicit appeal to diverse forms and methods, most of the contributions follow a classical, academic structure. Those that aim to provide a general theoretical framework proceed on a purely conceptual level, and question the indexicality of the medium, its theoretical connection to empirical reality and the attribution of factuality through abstract argumentations rather than interrogating its political relevance. By contrast, many of the articles engaged with particular films focus precisely on the ideological, aesthetical and ethical dimensions of the films in question. Therefore, even if some of them resort to American or continental philosophers or to critical theory, they primarily rely on the sensitive material as such. Disclosing the particular potential of doing philosophy *through* particular works by unfolding the way topics and concepts are interlaced with sensible forms and formats, those writings consider the multiple layers of reality and the heterogeneous mediations it is subject to rather than seeking to establish a general conceptualization. The particular force of reenactments, staging or fictionalization, the critical potential emanating from the deliberate choice of using aesthetic strategies such as montage, specific framings and the interrelation between image and sound, thus reveal the intelligibility of the sensitive material and discloses its inherent philosophical dimension.

In contrast to those — the contributions concentrating on theoretical questions and those that deploy the philosophical potential of particular films — three texts included in the publication are constructed in a strikingly different way and call for special notice. Werner Herzog’s *Minnesota-Declaration* is a very short, provocative and sometimes solemn statement against a method that he calls *cinema vérité*, a term he does not attribute to Jean Rouch, but to American observational or direct cinema⁴. According to him, this current “is devoid of *vérité*”; it “reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants” (379). In

opposition to this belief in facts, he postulates his own cinema as a seeking for the “deeper strata of truth” which can only be revealed “through fabrication and imagination and stylization” (379). Also Lars von Trier’s and Thomas Vinterberg’s *The Dogma 95 Manifesto* takes a compact, affirmative form. Against the *cinema des auteurs* and the illusionary cinema of emotions, it formulates a strict set of rules, the “vow of chastity,” claiming that (fiction) films should rely on realistic conditions and not recur to technical trickery or any form of manipulation. On a different level, Bill Nichols’ “Letter to Errol Morris” is addressed personally to a filmmaker and expresses his intense sensation of ethical indignation towards Morris’ way of dealing with the scandalous revelation of ongoing torture of the prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison in his film *Standing Operation Procedure* (2008). Those three contributions vitalize the debate by deflecting the attention from the scholarly standards to more subjective, engaged or radical apprehensions.

What is almost absent in the book is, however, an opening to “non-Western” voices and perspectives. Apart from two texts written by the filmmakers Ariella Azoulay and Diana Allan — both teaching in the USA — on their works in and about Palestine, none of the writings deals with positions from the East, Asia, Africa, the Arab world, South-America or other places outside Europe and the US. The vast majority of the contributors to the volume works in the United States and refers to theoretical positions from within this particular academic context or acknowledged by it. Even if the diversity of approaches included in the volume establishes undoubtedly a manifold of fruitful association between films, forms and ethical, aesthetical, epistemological or political dimensions, it is limited to American-European views on documentary films. Nonetheless, the publication inspires its readers to problematize their perception and its biases, and to look more thoroughly and more critically at films whose aim it is to mediate reality.

1. Brian Winston (ed.), *The Documentary Film Book* (London: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

2. Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow Jonathan (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

3. Jonathan Kahana (ed.), *The Documentary Film Reader. History, Theory, Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

4. See Eric Ames, *Ferocious Reality. Documentary according to Werner Herzog* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 9.