

The documentary temptation: Fiction filmmakers and non-fiction forms

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NECSUS 3 (2): 5–20

DOI: 10.1557/NECSUS2014.2.MART

Abstract

This essay addresses the ‘documentary temptation’ for filmmakers more usually associated with fiction: an encounter with reality – whether rendered in minimalist, observational, *cinéma-vérité*, or conventional reportage formats – that comes on an initial, primary level without artifice, pretence, contrivance, or the industrial and aesthetic machinery of narrative cinema. The notion of such a ‘return to zero’ is critically explored with reference to directors including Jean Eustache, James Benning, Martin Scorsese, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Wim Wenders, and Stan Brakhage.

Keywords: documentary, essay-film, *cinéma-vérité*, avant-garde, re-enactment

1

Some directors flirt with it at the beginning of their careers and then quickly move on, never to return, like Jacques Rozier after *Blue Jeans* (1958) and *Paparazzi* (1964). Some dwell there secretly, making a spin-off of their better-known productions, like François Truffaut putting together a little poem about planes launching and landing made from leftover shots in *La peau douce* (1964). Some use it as research, or as an audiovisual archive-testament, some manner of addendum to a particular fictional project, such as Benoît Jacquot making his portrait *Louis-René des Forêts* (1988) in tandem with his adaptation of that author’s *Les mendiants* (1988).

Some take a leap at a sudden, dramatic point in their lives, jumping from one train to another, once and for all (Jean-Pierre Gorin, Terry Zwig-off, Alexander Kluge). Some never go there at all, absolutely certain of their

storytelling course (Pedro Almodóvar, Rainer Werner Fassbinder). Some begin there, take a long detour through the land of fiction, and end up back where they started, like Michelangelo Antonioni in his circuitous path from *Gente del Po* (1947) to his enigmatic, short portraits of various landscapes (*Noto, Mandorli, Vulcano, Stromboli, Carnevale* [1993]). Some end up there, using humble technologies in a final gesture of do-it-yourself modesty and simplicity, like Hollywood legend King Vidor examining the affinities between himself and the painter Andrew Wyeth in *Metaphor* (1980). Some make a brief visit or two during their long careers, largely for personal reasons, such as Ingmar Bergman with *Karin's Face* (1984) and the various versions of *The Fårö Document* (1969, 1979).

I am speaking of what I will call the 'documentary temptation', as experienced by filmmakers who are more usually associated with fiction cinema. By this heuristic label I am not meaning to refer to every kind of film that may receive the label of 'documentary'. Out of the six modes of documentary identified by Bill Nichols in his groundbreaking work of classification, fiction filmmakers are notably drawn to what he calls the 'observational' mode, where unstaged realities are encountered and recorded.¹ Naturally, in practice, the modes that Nichols posited (including poetic, expository, participatory, reflexive, and performative) are never entirely distinct. Much contemporary television documentary, particularly in the cable era, leans more toward archival sifting (even if the archive in question is only the photos, clips, and interviews pertaining to some movie or music star) – which tends to the poetic, reflexive, and performative elements of what is today called the essay-film, as practiced (variously) by Edgardo Cozarinsky (*One Man's War* [1982]), Chris Marker (*Sunless* [1983]), and Jean-Luc Godard (*Histoire(s) du cinema* [1988-89]) – than direct reportage. Even the most elaborately-constructed essay-film may contain passages directly captured from reality, like the interviews embedded within Marker's *Level Five* (1997). We also need to factor the recent scholarship of Keith Beattie into any contemporary account of variations in documentary.² Beattie has further nuanced Nichols' initial taxonomy, especially via the previously underplayed aspects of spectacle and display in many overlooked forms of documentary (including its most experimental manifestations).

However, it is mainly the observational end of the documentary spectrum to which this essay – which aims to offer a survey rather than a complete analysis of the topic of fiction filmmakers using non-fictional forms – will refer. My choice of directors is neither systematic nor specific to any particular nation, form, style, or genre of cinema; at this preliminary

stage of investigation it seems to me that we need to perform a broad sweep of the many kinds of filmmakers who have (for whatever reason) succumbed to the 'call' of documentary at some often surprising moment (s) in their careers. My methodology here is an instance of the 'at random',³ formulated and enthusiastically encouraged by the philosopher Michel Serres.

The documentary temptation relates to the filmmakers' encounter with reality – whether finally rendered in minimalist, observational, *cinéma-vérité*, or quite conventional reportage formats. For filmmakers mainly associated with the creation of fiction – and hence of entire, complex, illusory worlds – this type of documentary is such a sweet temptation because it comes, at least on some initial, primary level, without artifice, without pretence, without contrivance, without the vast industrial and aesthetic machinery (building sets, large crews, maintenance over diverse spaces, times, and conditions of a coherent and cohesive fictional world) that comes with the terrain of fiction. The post-Nouvelle Vague director Luc Moullet – who has devoted documentaries to, among other curious subjects, Des Moines (*Le ventre d'Amérique* [1996]), murder and insanity in regional France (*Land of Madness* [2009]), and food (*Genèse d'un repas* [1978]) – puts the difference in characteristically amusing terms: while making a fiction you lose more weight than when making a documentary, because it is harder work!

In the imagination of most filmmakers around the world whose careers began after the Second World War, we could say that this documentary temptation corresponds to a certain dream of what cinematic Neorealism was meant to be but never actually was: real people ('non-professional actors'), no sets (just the environments of daily life), quotidian rituals, and unforced spectacle. The Italian Neorealists of the 1940s and 1950s such as Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini created a simulacrum of this ideal – but, as is glaringly obvious to our 21st century eyes, much of this was essentially fiction, albeit borrowing the clothing of reality (Rossellini filming in the European ruins for *Paisà* [1946] and *Germany, Year Zero* [1948]) and the burgeoning rhetoric of a realism across all the arts (the life of an ordinary, lonely old guy and his dog in De Sica's *Umberto D* [1952]).⁴ The documentary temptation is all about the 'return to zero' once associated (however mistakenly or dreamily) with Neorealism. Armed only with a camera and a sound recorder, or a small crew, the filmmaker drops his or her signature style, their familiar *mise en scène*, and humbly goes toward something they love or are fascinated by in the real world, perhaps some piece of their own autobiographical formation: a

person, a town, a community, a heroic or influential figure, an art form, a philosophical or religious tendency.

Some filmmakers constantly go back and forth between documentary and fiction (Werner Herzog, Paul Cox, Agnès Varda, Wim Wenders, Spike Lee), often enriching their fictional projects with inputs from their non-fictional excursions. Herzog has gone so far as to produce the fictional version (*Rescue Dawn* [2006]) of a prior documentary portrait (*Little Dieter Needs to Fly* [1998]) – although he did not manage to improve on it in this subsequent elaboration. Cox, an Australian director associated with Herzog (and also Guy Maddin) in the 1980s, often uses his short documentaries (*We Are All Alone My Dear* [1975], *The Island* [1975]) as matrices, generators, or ‘research centres’ for his feature-length fictions. Varda has found herself more famous for her non-fiction than for her fiction work because of the international success inaugurated by *The Gleaners and I* (2000) – although many of her works, whatever their genre or form, sit on a thin line between documentary and fiction, like *Les cent et une nuits de Simon Cinéma* (1995), her celebration of a century of cinema.

Spike Lee has frequently made documentaries (*Four Little Girls* [1997]) that are relatively little-known outside of the U.S. in terms of his public auteur image, mixing television techniques (in the manner of Ken Burns) with an African-American ‘choral’ aesthetic woven from a plurality of voices and real-life stories, richly treated at the post-production level of montage and musical orchestration. Lee’s moving account of the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe in the ‘requiem in four acts’ *When the Levees Broke* (2006) has (as with Varda) transformed him into an acclaimed documentarian. In Wenders’ case it is primarily his high-profile attachment to popular music and his association with key musicians (Ry Cooder, Bono, et al.) that has led to the creation of works such as *The Buena Vista Social Club* (1999) and *The Soul of a Man* (2003) – but it is also fed by his life-long infatuation with the ‘audiovisual diary’ form, expressing itself in films ranging from *Lightning Over Water* (1980), his haunted collaboration with Nicholas Ray, to *Notebook on Cities and Clothes* (1989) about the fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto and *Tokyo Ga* (1985), about his ‘affair with a city’. We also have the rich example of Orson Welles often moving between documentary and fiction, whose unfinished *Don Quixote* project was ultimately to be about his difficult and ever-changing relationship over four decades with Spain.⁵

For other directors documentary works occur within special parentheses, in the framework of particular small-scale (low-budget or televisual) projects set up between large-scale fictions. This is the trajectory of Martin

Scorsese, particularly since the mid-1990s, moonlighting in his off-time between epic feature narratives to deliver pedagogical essays on cinema history (*A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* [co-directed with Michael Henry Wilson, 1995], *My Voyage to Italy* [1999]), dynamic recordings of musical events (The Rolling Stones in *Shine a Light* [2008], harking back to his earlier *The Last Waltz* [1978] with The Band), or tributes to American monuments (as producer, writer, and mentor for film critic Kent Jones' *Lady by the Sea: The Statue of Liberty* [2004]). It is also an element of John Boorman's career, lured to television to make an autobiographical whimsy (*I Dreamt I Woke Up* [1991]) and an ode to a friend (*Lee Marvin: A Personal Portrait* [1998]), among other occasional assignments. That is what such films by Scorsese, Boorman or Julien Temple are: *occasional*, in the English-language sense, as in tailored to fit a specific occasion or commission.

2

To truly understand the documentary temptation as I am proposing it we need to take a backward glance at Scorsese's earlier, fascinating portraits in the style of home movies: *American Boy* (1978), about his wired-up, story-telling pal Steven Prince; and *Italianamerican* (1974), about his family, especially his parents (who are also familiar from their cameo appearances in his fictions). Here the lineaments of the great temptation become apparent: rough or no-nonsense camerawork, filming in 16 millimetre, direct sound recording, a texture of daily incidents (guys hanging out, drinking, and sharing tales, or a mother making meals), and random, unplanned exclamations, laughs, and bodily movements. Scorsese both reinvents his usual fictive style of 'energy realism' (as Raymond Durnat described it in relation to *Raging Bull*⁶), bringing it closer to the manner of John Cassavetes, and traces the roots of his socio-cultural upbringing.

Abbas Kiarostami – whose work has frequently crossed documentary and fiction, in highly conceptual and sometimes secretive ways – provides another example of the temptation with *ABC Africa* (2001). This is a case of straight-down-the-line observational filmmaking, without his frequent reflexive games and explorations of the medium, letting himself (and his basic filmmaking tools) do some looking and listening, wandering and watching, noticing and noting, in a strange land, itself a kind of 'ground zero' of civilization, close to an experience of the apocalypse in Kiarostami's mind. Here we find a characteristic trope of the fiction filmmaker

when he or she is making documentary: the *drifting* through a place or space or landscape, encountering people (children at play, the elderly telling their stories, the sick in suffering, their professional helpers), following the vagaries of a random journey. This is a form Varda often uses, even when she is documenting the Parisian street on which she lives, the Rue Daguerre in *Daguerréotypes* (1976). Yet Kiarostami, like Scorsese, inadvertently finds himself encountering a mirror image of a scene from his own fiction, hence the spectacle of the lightning storm in the dark of night in *ABC Africa*, so reminiscent of the solemn, penultimate scene in *A Taste of Cherry* (1997).

Documentaries by fiction filmmakers are generally, as the phrase goes, labours of love. Sydney Pollock pays homage to a beloved architect in *Sketches of Frank Gehry* (2005); Clint Eastwood sums up his love for a particular mode of jazz music in *Piano Blues* (2003); Budd Boetticher returns to his primal worship of bullfighting and bullfighters in *Arruza* (1972), and of horses in the Super-8 film *My Kingdom For ...* (1985); Abel Ferrara temporarily abandoned his career in fiction film and seized the opportunities to document the cities of New York (*Chelsea on the Rocks* [2008] and *Mulberry St.* [2010]) and Naples (*Napoli, Napoli, Napoli* [2009]); Alain Resnais compiles the tribute *Gershwin* (1992, with a commentary scripted by celebrated film critic-historian Claude Beylie); Bertrand Tavernier (who appears in *Gershwin*) makes *Mississippi Blues* (1983) in collaboration with Hollywood legend Robert Parrish, ‘the two directors meandering through rural Mississippi in search of the spirit of local music and society’ (according to IMDb’s description). All these are (with the occasional exception of Ferrara’s films) essentially gentle, easy-going, sometimes melancholic works – very different to what happens when some of these same directors tackle historical-political topics (such as Resnais with *Night and Fog* [1955] or Tavernier with *Histoires of Broken Lives* [2001]). As we shall see in the following section, the documentary temptation can also grow a political dimension.

3

When fiction-based filmmakers make documentaries their work tends to be of a particular character, a particular nature. We do not really find these filmmakers wanting to become Frederick Wiseman or Harun Farocki, making films that are Olympian in their vision, cool, detached, sizing up an entire social institution, sector, or strata; films with a deliberate, dispassio-

nate, analytic style, working with 'building blocks' of observational construction, as Farocki quite literally does in his film about bricks *By Comparison* (2009). However, we can trace a number of fiction filmmakers whose involvement with theoretical ideas and conceptual forms takes them into new documentary modes and spaces.

Of all the fiction filmmakers who have made forays into the documentary realm Jean Eustache has most closely approached the kind of detached perspective we associate with Wiseman and Farocki. He filmed the ritual slaughter of a pig in *Le cochon* (1970, in collaboration with Jean-Michel Barjol) and recorded the life-testimony of his grandmother in *Nu-méro zéro* (1971), reworked for television as *Odette Robert* (1980). He laid down patterns for these films that anticipate the moves of contemporary minimalist cinema, such as we see today from Asia and other parts of the world: static camera, long takes, minimal interference from the director in the unfolding action. Going further, in his twin set of documentaries made in the town of his birth – as if to cheekily sow filmographical confusion, he named them both *La Rosière de Pessac* (*The Virgin of Pessac*, 1968 and 1979) – Eustache plays an intriguing game with documentary temporality. Separated by 11 years, Eustache filmed two performances of a traditional ritual – the 'crowning' of a chosen, local virgin girl. The ritual remains more or less the same each year; Eustache attempts to reproduce the codified *mise en scène* of his 1968 film in 1979. However, against these unchanging or only slightly changing elements, the films record the already enormous differences and alterations in village life, the significance of customs, and the encroachments of the outside world. Here, in a method that anticipates Farocki, and with an anthropological or ethnographic perspective similar to Wiseman, Eustache seeks less to encounter a messy, immediate reality than to measure social and historical difference within what French theory calls a *dispositif*: a way of filming according to certain pre-established rules and concepts.

An intriguing mid-way case between the spontaneity of *cinéma-vérité* and the logic of the *dispositif* occurs in the work of Jean-Louis Comolli, a celebrated critic and theorist who began writing in the early 1960s at *Cahiers du cinéma* and is now best known as a documentarian whose films chiefly address political situations in and around Marseille (*Marseille de père en fils* [1989], in two parts, and *Rêves de France à Marseille* [2003]). Comolli's first features in the 1970s were fictional, such as the fascinating if overextended *La Cecilia* (1975), about an Italian-Brazilian commune of 1887. One of his chief concerns, both aesthetically and theoretically, was the key cinematic resource of *mise en scène* (the staging of scenes for the

camera). Rather than thinking of *mise en scène* as writing or painting in images and sounds what is in the auteur's mind, Comolli felt that we need to conceive of a coded, social dimension to whatever happens before a camera at the very moment when bodies arrange themselves into shapes and patterns of interaction.⁷ This was a revolutionary idea in itself, arising from the ferments of May 1968, and it remains a challenge to the purely artistic ideal of cinematic creation. In fact, Comolli was extending the intuition of Pier Paolo Pasolini who, in his stirring 'Manifesto for a New Theatre' of 1968, contended that:

[t]he semiological archetype of theatre is the spectacle that unfolds every day before our eyes and ears, in the street, at home, in public places, etc. In this sense, social reality is a representation that is not unaware of being a performance, with its resultant codes (good manners, appropriate behaviour, comportment, etc). In a word, social reality is not unaware of being a ritual.⁸

Compare this with Comolli's pronouncement in the late 1970s, when he was still involved primarily with fiction cinema:

[i]t is naive to locate *mise en scène* solely on the side of the camera: it is just as much, and even before the camera intervenes, everywhere where the social regulations order the place, the behaviour and almost the 'form' of subjects in the various configurations in which they are caught (and which do not demand the same type of performance: here authority, here submission; standing out or standing aside; etc). In other words, script, actors, *mise en scène* or not, all that is filmable in the changing, historical, determined relationships of men and things to the visible, are *dispositifs* of representation.⁹

What we see emerging here is a new concept of *social mise en scène*, something Comolli has never ceased pursuing in his critical writing and in his film work alike – with one key difference: the switch from fiction to documentary. In the 1990s, deep into his new career, Comolli was asked, 'Is there a documentary *mise en scène*?' This is surely a paradoxical question, since the pro-filmic events in documentary are (usually) unplanned and unstaged, while *mise en scène* is a matter of choreography and artifice. Comolli embraced this paradox, coming to formulate the idea that there is not only the kind of *social mise en scène* evoked above (the familiar patterns of and rituals of social life visible in their reflex enactment) but also what he called an *auto mise en scène*, a performance or staging of the

self by individuals – particularly strong when there is a camera around. In his book *Voir et pouvoir* ('Vision and Power'), Comolli testifies:

[e]ach person I film also comes to their encounter with the film with their own *habitus*, this tight fabric, this framework of learnt gestures, acquired reflexes, assimilated postures ... The filmed subject, the subject in the film's view, prepares him or herself for the film, consciously *and* unconsciously, is penetrated by it, adjusts themselves to the cinematic operation, and thus puts in place his/her own *mise en scène*, the performance of the body in the space and time defined by the look of the other (the 'scene').¹⁰

For Comolli, documentary filmmaking – particularly of a radical or leftist political persuasion – thus involves two stages or levels. Observational filmmaking – for much of what Comolli films is out of his strict control, such as speeches delivered at political rallies – is a matter of *bringing out* or somehow underlining this reflex, coded, theatrical, or ritualistic aspect of spontaneous social events, much as Eustache did in his twin documentaries. In this sense Comolli takes the option of *respecting* – sometimes with a sly sense of irony, or submerged critique – the *auto mise en scène* of those individuals who allow themselves to appear before his camera and be included in his films.

In fact, this strategy has become a crucial resource of contemporary documentary practice and it has even become a part of conventional television reportage, also advertising (particularly in a humorous mode); filming people *as they want to be seen*, inhabiting (as it were) their own imaginary, their ideal self-image. The Australian filmmaker David Caesar, who began with several popular and very stylised documentaries (in the tradition of Errol Morris) before departing for the land of fiction (such as *Prime Mover* [2009]), made this approach his signature. His frontally-framed portraits of ordinary, suburban people standing next to their beloved television sets, letterboxes, cars, or pets (in films such as *Body Works* [1988] and *Car Crash* [1995]) have been highly influential on subsequent documentarians in several countries. Comolli goes one step further. For him, the film's own *mise en scène* – which, in documentary, relates specifically to camera-work (since so many other variables, such as setting and lighting, are beyond his control) – must enter into a dialectical relationship (sympathetic or critical, or both) with the *auto mise en scène* of those filmed, a process which he calls a 'two-step dance'.

Often, the filmmaker's gesture aims, consciously or not, at blocking, mixing up, erasing or annulling the subject's own *mise en scène* ... The

wisest *mise en scène* cedes the step to the other, favours his or her development, gives them the time and the frame to nuance themselves, deploy themselves. Filming thus becomes a conjugation, a relation, a rapport.¹¹

4

We have heard and read much over the past 25 years about the 'line between documentary and fiction', the hybrid works by many (such as Kiarostami's *Close-Up* [1990]) that cleverly move between fictional and non-fictional material, nesting one inside the other, often in ways that are hard to immediately detect. With the aid of recent developments in digital technology Antonioni made what is among the strangest and most beguiling of these docu-fiction hybrids: *The Gaze of Michelangelo* (2004), which shows the director walking around and admiring a famous sculpture of Moses by the master. Nothing too odd, it seems, until we remember that Antonioni had long been paralysed by a debilitating stroke (which also robbed him of the power of speech) and was unable to walk except in this unreal, animated state!

However, here I am interested in pinning down a more particular and restricted movement: the return of a fictional element into documentary projects by narrative fiction filmmakers. The documentary temptation thereby performs a torsion, and by this route takes on a paradoxical character. Of crucial importance here is the recourse to *psychodrama*, which, in its theatrical origins, involves an overrunning of the theatrical illusion by a real element unleashed by performance: real passions, real acts (whether erotic or violent), real outcomes. This was central to the work of Cassavetes (*Opening Night* [1977] is a veritable fictive essay on psychodrama) and also of Norman Mailer, particularly in *Maidstone* (1970), where the improvised 'happening' between actors (including Rip Torn) momentarily spills into dangerous, physically-threatening territory. Robert Kramer, in his movement from political newsreels in the 1960s to highly-charged political fictions such as *Ice* (1970) and *Milestones* (1975), and on to the many sophisticated essay-films he shot around the world (such as *Starting Point* [1994]), was unafraid to wander onto psychodramatic soil. The little-known Australian underground classic *Yakkety Yack* (Dave Jones, 1974) offers an ingenious parody of this very 1970s obsession.

Psychodrama in documentary takes two principal forms: either the reportage contains an element of *re-enactment*, or the situation unfolding before the camera develops – sometimes precisely as a result of the film

crew being there – into a distinctively dynamic, volatile direction. I shall consider this second possibility first. When things get really out of hand in the pro-filmic event (i.e., whatever is going on in front of the camera) the documentary develops a rushing, headlong speed, and the filmmaker has to manage a merely precarious control over incidents that have their own complex, in-motion logic, as in the prodigious work of anthropologist Jean Rouch (who made very few purely fictional pieces in his long career), or in the most paroxysmic examples of *cinéma-vérité*. Curiously, in the cases of Scorsese's *American Boy* or Vitali Kanevsky's *We, Children of the 20th Century* (1994) – the latter a portrait of Russian street kids, several of whom had already been teen actors in Kanevsky's fictions – it is when the real chaos begins that documentary begins to mimic the *mise en scène* of disorder staged in *Mean Streets* (1973) or *Freeze, Die, Revive!* (1989).

The fullest expression of this mirroring of an auteur's fictions in his documentaries occurs, in the American context, in the work of James Toback. In *Tyson* (2008), again, we see a person – this time a famous sports celebrity, Mike Tyson – who has already appeared in Toback's fictions, particularly the partly-improvised *Black and White* (1999), where he explodes violently in the midst of a scene that mimics incidents in his biography. This in itself constitutes a figure, a familiar constellation of characters and events, in the Tobackian universe. His early book, written in the 'participant observer' mode of the New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s, is about the American football player Jim Brown, who then, as an actor, became a menacing Phallic Superego in the nightmarish world of Toback's debut feature *Fingers* (1978). Moreover, throughout the span of his career, Toback has frequently announced the view of existence as psychodrama that he has always tried to dramatise and capture on film: we are all actors, but unstable, borderline-schizophrenic actors, living out the crazy scenes in the fantasy-scenario which is our life.¹² Finally, at the end of this line, we reach *Tyson*. Much of it is intimate interview material filmed in digital close-up (interspersed with obligatory archival material, as in Emir Kusturica's somewhat similar and contemporaneous film-portrait of Diego Maradona), but instead of being simple, reassuring 'talking head' footage typical of a television format, Toback offers these images as the record of a psychic madness, a self which is never complete and instead changes at each instant, poised between confession and denial, desire and guilt, recall and erasure.

Another key theme and structure in Toback's cinema is the *encounter* – whether of two individuals or many in a group. For his most colourful and radical excursion into documentary Toback decided to stage a party-like

'happening' in *The Big Bang* (1989). He assembled a remarkable group of disparate people (actors, criminals, doctors, philosophers, gamblers) and had them discuss the fairly surreal question 'did God create the universe in a cosmic orgasm?' The film is proudly wayward, incoherent, associative; everybody (once again) ceaselessly performs themselves, and what they discuss (sex, money, power, violence) perfectly mirrors Toback's imaginary world as expressed in his movie fictions, as well as offering a glimpse into his own social background and connections. *The Big Bang* is a genial psychodrama; it evokes the kind of wild reality which is at the heart of the documentary temptation – but this time morphing into a fanciful fiction that anticipates the weirdest moments of reality television in the 21st century, such as on U.S. programs like *The Hills* (2006-2010). Toback has recently returned to this realm in *Seduced and Abandoned* (2013), his Cannes-set document of himself and Alec Baldwin trying to raise money for an unlikely film project titled *Last Tango in Tikrit* – roping in Scorsese, Bernardo Bertolucci, Roman Polanski, Francis Ford Coppola, and a crowd of actors along the way.

Let us now treat the element of re-enactment, which is, in a sense, something already visibly in play on Tyson's face in Toback's documentary about him. Over the past decade or so filmmakers and cultural commentators have become obsessed with the workings of trauma and its legacy within the scarred, distorted, psychic memories of victims – whether that trauma is on a personal scale (sexual abuse) or a collective one (wars, natural disasters, the Holocaust). A documentary such as *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003) is merely the most visible manifestation of this international trend, while Rithy Panh's *S21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine* (2003) rates among the most profound achievements of non-fiction production of the past two decades.

The Australian filmmaker Peter Tammer, a major figure in the independent cinema movement of the 1970s, has made a psychodramatic, Toback-style exploration of the ambiguities of acting and performance in situations of high anxiety (*Fear of the Dark* [1985]), but his masterpiece is *Journey to the End of Night* (1982), in which an ex-army man re-enacts – in a ghostly, play-acting fashion, as if in a trance – his extreme experiences of violence directed against Japanese soldiers. As amateurish as the *mise en scène* appears here a disquieting truth emerges that goes well beyond what would have been possible in either a smooth 'dramatic recreation' (of the kind contemporary television documentary loves to do) or a more typically lucid, reflective, close-up 'talking head'.

5

Avant-garde or experimental cinema deserves its own study in terms of its often novel and sometimes mind-bending uses of documentary and fiction. The same goes for video art. For instance, the case of talented ex-*Cahiers* critic Jean-André Fieschi creating, with the lightweight *paluche* camera, the floating, mysterious, largely subjective fiction *New Mysteries of New York* (1976-81), before transiting – like his colleague, André S. Labarthe – to a long series of lyrical documentaries for television or DVD about artists and filmmakers (such as his portrait of Rohmer at work in *La fabrique du Conte d'été* [2005]). I will mention only two special cases from the canon of American experimental cinema: James Benning and Stan Brakhage.¹³

In the first phase of his artistic career Benning was preoccupied with the overlap between a hard-edge, pictorial formalism (as pioneered within painting and still photography) and narrative systems or forms (as were a number of his contemporaries in the American avant-garde, including Yvonne Rainer and Hollis Frampton). Benning would cleverly introduce elements of plot intrigue through marginal actions, particularly through soundtrack overlays, into 'serial' image-structures – strings of pictures of houses or streets, for example, often following abstract colour schemes in their ordering. A typical example from this point in his work is *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977), filmed in mundane locations (factories, shops, streets) around Wisconsin. *27 Years Later* (2005) is the answer to, or 'ruinous remake' (Stephen Heath's phrase) of, Benning's earlier film (he usually screens the two together to facilitate audience comparison). Aware that the world he had filmed was on the verge of disappearing altogether under the force of creeping industrialisation and globalisation, he set out to place his camera in almost exactly the same spots as he had in *One Way Boogie Woogie*. Faced with the material difficulty of 're-recording' what in many cases is no longer there, in a landscape frequently transformed beyond his recognition, the entire project undergoes a massive material and conceptual displacement: 'same' film (in some sense), completely different concerns. The pictorialism, the games with narrative, are largely gone; suddenly *27 Years Later* is – in its active memory-relation to the first film – a disturbing, minimalist, political documentary on social change over the passage of time. What registers as outright gags or purely formalist experiments in the original – twin sisters performing choreographed gestures, a woman leaving a factory (in an evocation of early cinema newsreels), three-colour separation giving a ghostly effect to passing cars, the shapes of belching factory chimneys – become (especially when the same people

perform the same gestures) markers of a bleak social critique. This serial displacement is helped by Benning's ingenious recourse to the same technique Marguerite Duras used in her 'second take' on *India Song* (1975): he retains exactly the same soundtrack as in *One Way Boogie Woogie*, now completely surreal and disturbing in its relation to the new images.

The case of Brakhage is even more intriguing. Long regarded as the master of abstraction, whether beginning from animation or cinematography (his *Text of Light* [1974] spins a feature from views of light and smoke in an ashtray), in his famous 1971 'Pittsburgh Trilogy' Brakhage turned to a city and three of its institutions, at once omnipresent and beyond notice, hyper-visible and invisible: a police station (*Eyes*), dead bodies in the morgue (*The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*), and a hospital (*Deus Ex*). This would seem to be a perfect example of the documentary temptation. There is no doubt that a strong dose of concrete, material reality – as well as an echo of Hollywood movie and television genres of the 1970s – alters and expands Brakhage's usual repertoire, and that even the trace of explicit social critique here enters his œuvre. What really registers in this trilogy is the tension, the incessant back-and-forth between physicality and abstraction, conquered anew by Brakhage. We are constantly on the point of forming a world (or a fiction of it) and losing it in the play of forms.

6

My final case in point is the curious career of Jean-Pierre Gorin. It is difficult to say definitively that he began in either documentary or fiction. Working with Jean-Luc Godard as the other half of the Dziga Vertov Group in the late 1960s, his first films are truly essays, hybrid constructions of original footage (shot in many countries), found footage, graphics, and heavy voice-over soundtracks of theoretical explication (*Wind from the East* [1969], *Struggles in Italy* [1969], *Vladimir and Rosa* [1971]). Yet in all his statements at the time Gorin made clear that the movement into fiction was imminent and necessary. *Tout va bien* (1972) marked the heroic but unfortunately doomed attempt to make a political narrative (almost a comedy) for mass audience consumption.¹⁴

From that point, after the group's dissolution, Gorin made his way to the United States where he has lived and taught ever since. In that new context he reworked his essayistic orientation – but now, on each occasion, from a documentary basis: a reportage on twins with their own unique language in *Poto and Cabengo* (1978), immersion in a group of model train enthusiasts in

Routine Pleasures (1986), hanging out with a Samoan street gang in *My Crazy Life* (1991). Although he has often announced an imminent move back into fiction projects Gorin's politically-inflected aesthetic has fully materialised in these unique docu-essay hybrids.¹⁵ In Gorin's films, fiction – particularly through the memory and citation of narrative movies, forms, genres, and styles – is everywhere. In fact, using a famous triad borrowed from modern psychoanalysis, we could say that everything in Gorin's films of the 1980s and 1990s happens simultaneously on three levels: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. Real: an undeniable, palpable trace of real people, traces, and events; unrepeatable, irreducible, unique. Imaginary: the ideas, fictions, associations, contexts, histories, mythologies, and clichés that inevitably accrue to or can be generated out of these realities. Symbolic: people, events, and institutions become symbolic when they are typical or easy to generalise; when a social analysis or argument can be triggered or generated from their filmic representation.

How can we hold all those levels together simultaneously in our minds? As viewers or critics, when it comes to documentary film we are too used to separating them out, concentrating on what is either Real or Symbolic (and mainly censoring the Imaginary, which is what Gorin, like Comolli, always insists upon). Filmmakers are always ahead of critics in their grasp of what is innovative and progressive in any kind of cinema. Those filmmakers who come from fiction into documentary, whether they are merely 'taking a holiday' there, grasping the opportunity to pursue a personal obsession, or elaborating a conceptual experiment, have a good chance of mixing all the levels and coming up with some cinematic creature we have never seen the likes of before.

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Notes

1. Nichols 2001.
2. Beattie 2004, 2008.
3. Serres 1997.
4. For a detailed demonstration of this argument see Rohdie 1979.
5. See Rosenbaum 2007.
6. Durnat 1984, p. 40.
7. This section draws upon material developed at length in my book *Mise en scène and Film Style* (2014).
8. Pasolini 2007, pp. 135-136.
9. Comolli 1980, p. 139.
10. Comolli 2004, p. 153.
11. Ibid., p. 154.
12. See Toback 1978.
13. For a discussion of Benning within the context of the 'experimental remake/sequel' see Martin 2009.
14. See my essay on *Tout va bien* in a forthcoming anthology on Godard edited by Vinzenz Hediger, from Schürer.
15. See Martin 2013.