

HISTORY, MEMORY, TRUTH, FICTION

CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARY PRACTICES

UNIVERSIDADE PRESBITERIANA MACKENZIE

LESSON – WEEK 2

DOCUMENTARY AS SUCH? DEFINITIONS AND LIMITATIONS

27 AUGUST, 2019

OBJECTIVES FOR TODAY:

- * Ask some basic Q's about doc. film, in order to comprehend inherent *obstacles* to any attempt at *defining* and *distinguishing* doc from non-doc
- * Analyze these limitations within variety of works of *apparently* documentary nature...
 - Hopefully, LaRocca's useful intro to "state of doc. film theory" has furnished us w/ a certain degree of "common knowledge" about the kinds of questions we can ask of doc. as a mode of represent'n and visual discourse.
 - We'll delve more deeply into just a couple of the many theoretical questions he outlines, mainly with the aim of getting us all onto equal conceptual footing **when it comes to distinguishing documentary from other kinds of visual works/practices.**
- * Ultimate goal: dispel any last illusion any of you/us may have about "documentary film" as either *ontologically* or *formally* different from film itself.
- * First, let's review some of the definitions we devised and discussed last week, then "test" them through a few "case studies"...

I. REVIEW

* **[Slide 1]** OUR DEFINITION(S) OF DOCUMENTARY:

- A "register"/"recording" of "real" historical "events"...
- The establishment of a clear relationship between the *subject* and *object* of documentary (i.e. between the person who *documents* and the people/places *documented*)
- The *results* of an *investigation* into/about something that really happened : hence, a "**document**" of the historical world
 - But **ojo!** As Platinga asserts, "to confuse a document with a documentary film is a serious error of categorization."
- The (faithful) *account* of events/people/places as if they were real (i.e. with verosimilitude)
 - **[Animate slide]** But **ojo!**: *this* definition is usually the one applied to *fiction* when referring to realism...

... so already, in our own preliminary definitions of documentary, we veer very close to the confusion between doc and non-doc...

* **[Slide 2] BILL NICHOLS'S DEFINITIONS OF DOCUMENTARY:**

- Nichols attempts to address some of this confusion by formulating more precise distinction(s) between *documentary* and *non-documentary* works
- 1. A "documentary" work refers (directly and explicitly) to actual "facts", without modifying them or introducing "new," unverifiable data...
- 2. A "documentary" work represents reality *objectively* ... (unlike the *non-documentary* work—i.e. "fiction"— which represents reality *subjectively*)
- 3. A "documentary" work addresses, and reveals, "real people" in their "real contexts" ...
They are not *professional* actors, but rather *social actors*
- 4. A "documentary" work can "tell a story" about "reality," yet that story is never the *interpretation* of events, but rather, the *actual history* of those "real" events.

II. COMPLICATING THE QUESTION: A FEW "TEST CASES"

* DOCUMENTARY OR NOT?

For each of the following: assess "documentary" status of images in light of Nichols' 4 basic attributes of doc.:

- **[Slide 3] Photos by Silvio Zuccheri**

- Presumably works of *pure documentary photography* ("register" of events related to end of military dictatorship)
- "Reporting"/photojournalism... free of "interpretation" or "addition" of data...
... But is this really so? Note how these images are *framed* and *constructed*... (the *mise-en-scène*)

- **[Slide 4] Photos by Paz Errázuriz:**

- Documentary Photography with an *artistic impulse*?
...Or rather, "Art Photography"... with a certain "will to documentary"? (an implicit "documentary desire"... or the explicit imposition of a *documentary frame*?)
- Note the titles: an attempt to *override* the patently "subjective" nature of these images with a very concrete *here/who/when*?
◊ But these titles *complicate* the documentary nature of these photographs more than they *reinforce* it

- **[Slide 5] Clip: *Los rubios*, Albertina Carri (Argentina, 2003)**

- A "documentary" about traumatic childhood memory of *national* trauma... in which director recurs to use of *stop-motion animation* in order to "represent reality"

- A film that attempts to "document" the very experience, the immateriality of "Memory" of childhood memories of *absent parents*...

◊ Hence, a film that *poses question*: "how to document a "reality" that *really took place but cannot be recovered*?"

* HENCE **[Ask-discuss] what are some of the problems with these definitions of documentary... both ours and Nichols's?**

- i. Many "documentary works" do "intervene" in "reality" ... i.e. through *recreations, staging, mise-en-scène, framing*, etc...
- ii. Many "documentary works" are *not*, nor even *attempt* to be *objective* in any way. To the contrary, they often aim precisely for the *subjective interpretation* of "reality"....(often through rhetorical tools of *persuasion*)
- iii. The "social actor" of the documentary (the "object")... is never exempt from her own *self-fashioning* before the camera... "Acting" implies "performance," whether in the documentary situation, or in a work of fiction... **[doc object is also always the subject of doc!]**
- iv. And... if a "documentary" work avails itself of "creative" methods in order to better "document" the "real" events it is attempting to analyze or convey (as in Carri)?

Or... if a documentary work is attempting to "document" what does not give itself easily to documentation? (For instance: memories/memory)?

> Can we continue to refer to such works as "documentary" in any conventional sense?

*** In this light... HOW DO WE "DEFINE" DOCUMENTARY OR DISTINGUISH IT FROM WHAT IS "NOT DOCUMENTARY"?**

III. DISTINGUISHING DOCUMENTARY: SOME BASIC QUESTIONS

* **[Slide 7] "DISTINGUISHING" DOCUMENTARY: THREE POSSIBLE FRAMEWORKS**

- What documentary *is* (what *innate* or *formal* properties might distinguish doc. from other types of cinema)
- What documentary *does* (what *unique* relationship betw. doc. *apparatus* and doc. *protagonists* might distinguish doc. film)
- What one *does with* documentary (what particular relat'p betw. doc. *object* and doc. *spectator/public* might distinguish doc. film)
- Today: we'll focus principally on first framework (what doc. *is*); then, we'll *begin* to outline the second framework (what doc *does*).
- Third framework-question of *what one does w/ doc*, i.e. of particular relationship betw. doc. *object* and doc. *spectator*—will inform our discussions in Aulas 3 & 4 (from two very different angles)

* [Slide 8] FIRST FRAMEWORK:

Let's begin w/ first question: What *is* documentary? I.e. What *innate* or *formal* properties distinguish it from *no-doc. film*?

- Doc. film theory has long attempted to establish **difference** of Documentary... mainly on either *ontological* or *formal* grounds...
- And, per LaRocca's review, it has largely *failed* to distinguish doc. in these ways..

- **Nonetheless: it's a potentially useful exercise to try it ourselves. So...**

A. The (stronger) *ontological* thesis on "Difference" of Doc.: Documentary film is intrinsically distinguishable from other modes of cinematic representation (i.e. fiction film).

- Central question of ont. thesis: Does doc have distinct—because *immediate, direct, privileged*—relationship to "reality" and to "truth"?

[Ask] How would we formulate this ontological argument for doc. difference?

- If "distinct," then: doc. images must be *objective* representations of the world, i.e. of *actual, observable* reality, "out there" ("this *did* exist/occur"; these images are "true"...) ... while fiction film images must be *subjective* representations—i.e. *inventions/fabrications* of a "possible" world, however *plausibly* they might *resemble* "reality" ("this *could have* existed/occurred", these images are *lies*)...
 - ◊ I.e. documentary *image*—in contrast to fictional image—bears *immanent* relationship to *reality*; fiction bears *secondary* (i.e. *displaced/distorted*) relat'p to reality

B. The (weaker) *formal* thesis on "Difference" of Doc.: Documentary film is formally distinguishable from other cinematic modes (esp. fiction film)?

- Central question of formal thesis: Does doc. have its "own language": a set of formal techniques/principles that are proper and exclusive to it?

[Ask] How would we formulate the formal argument for doc. difference?

- If "distinct," then: *whether or not*—indeed, even if doc & fiction cannot be distinguished on *ontological* grounds—i.e. if both figure as *fabrications* of "the real"—their "fabrications" nonetheless must employ *immanently* different formal means...

Note: This is precisely Bill Nichols's operation in formulating his "documentary modes"

- ◊ Further—very influential—effort to define documentary in most precise way possible
- ◊ Borrows in certain respects from similar efforts in field of literature (beginning with Aristotle's *Poetics*) to distinguish between genres
- ◊ Documentary "modes of representation" akin to literary genres insofar as they encompass sets of "conventions" for each mode

- **Testing the claims:** Comparison of two clips

[Slide 9] Exhibit A. Podwórka

◊ Perhaps most apparently “*objective*” of films selected for today: 6 static, long takes, from 3 to 6+ mins each, of Polish children playing in courtyards in Lodz, Poland

(run clip)

◊ **[Ask]** How might we describe what is intrinsically (i.e. ontologically) “documentary” about Lockhart’s film?

> Ostensibly unmediated observation of *real* children in *real* context...

> Life (e.g. “*reality*”) apparently “unfolding” before maximally “unobtrusive” camera

◊ **[Ask]** But... is there anything “fictional” about Podwórka? I.e. what is subjective or constructed here?)

> *Deliberate framing* (frames w/in frame => “*fiction*” of film frame);

> Activation of off-screen space (creates “*suspense*”)

> Child’s play as *performance* itself (i.e., as *representation*...): Lockhart actually stages these tableau...

~ In other words: *despite* apparent “*objectivity*,” *mediation* of “*reality*” is undeniable... and indeed **unavoidable**...

~ Even on *formal* level, the *techniques* used are common to *all* cinema: framing, mise-en-scène, montage, etc...

Note: By same token, Nichols’s own attempts to distinguish doc. on formal and ontological grounds (i.e. by inventing “genres” that he calls “modes”) also fails

∞ Expository/Poetic – Observational – Interactive – Reflexive... : all ultimately prove to be innately *hybrid* “*genres*”. Almost impossible to find *pure* examples of any mode

∞ Meanwhile, *conventions* of these modes can be found in *countless fiction films throughout film history*...

∞ Nichols himself seems to strain to rectify this problem by continually refining parameters of each category over decades, while adding several new modes to his taxonomy...

...to point that the entire system of classification soon collapses under its own weight...

[Slide 10] Exhibit B. (Jeanne Dielman):

◊ Now, let’s analyze a second piece of “*evidence*” to see if there’s anything we missed in the first. Can we redeem either the *ontological* or *formal* thesis on doc. difference?

iOJO! If you've seen it, don't give it away!

(run clip)

◊ **[Ask]** Fiction film or documentary film? (**show of hands...**) Why? (**debate**)

- > On strictly *formal* grounds, little to distinguish *Jeanne Dielman* from *Podwórka*
- > On strictly *ontological* grounds... degrees of mediation may vary... but no "pure objectivity" or "documentary neutrality" can be established in *either* case
 - ~ That is, there is nothing here that *intrinsically* distinguishes these images as *either* documentary or fiction: they are simply *the filmic construction* of an *observed reality*...
 - ~ But the relative *truthfulness* of this construction is not *inherent* to the images themselves... (it resides elsewhere...)

- The "Fiction of Objectivity": an Object Lesson...

- The phenomenon we're alighting on here is what B. Nichols calls the "Fiction of Objectivity" in any kind of cinematic representation...
- Insofar as documentary *is* cinema, we might just as well speak of innate "Fiction of Doc."
- Let's drive home the lesson with two more examples of *inherent limitations of any distinction between doc and non-doc* on either ontological or formal grounds
 - ◊ They may also be helpful in approaching "difference" of films like *Podwórka*, and especially *People's Park*, from alternative framework...

1. [Slide 11] Clip from *Worst Case Scenario*, dir. John Smith (UK, 2003)

> Background: (35mm stills shot over course of 1 week, from window of apartment bldg above Vienna street corner; images then rearranged out of chrono-order, into quasi-narrative... w/ foley sounds standing in for direct sound)

(run clip)

> **[Ask]** In what sense is film an object lesson in *fiction of documentary* (B. Nichols: "the fiction of objectivity")?

- ~ On one level, can't be more "documentary" in sense of trace: analogue still photos of "real" people on "real" street corner of "real" city...
 - ...i.e. events "actually happened," leaving photochemical trace on celluloid
- ~ And yet, by dint of montage—formal device proper to *all* cinema—
 - ∞ **[Ask]:** What is montage? **[Answer, nutshell: pure fiction, i.e. construction]**
 - ~ This "objective truth" is completely *fictionalized* (eyeline matches create suggest *narrative causality* among disconnected time-space fragments)

2. [Slide 12] Stills from *A Place I've Never Been*

> **[Ask]** In what sense is this film *also* an object lesson in "fiction of documentary"?

- ~ Only *apparently* another "limit-case" of "documentary objectivity"
- ~ Background: thousands of images of Parthenon in Athens culled from social media/photo sharing sites online. The "subject" (documentarian") of the "documentary" is "documenting" a "place he's never been"...
- ~ In effect, Adrian Flury is not the "subject" of the "process of documentation," nor does he bear any relationship to the "real events" and "real people" in the images...
- ~ Hence, **the conventional "subject-object" relationship completely disappears**... but does this render the film *more* objective? Or does it actually transform it into a *pure fiction*?
 - ∞ Again: like Smith's film, the images are almost *purely* "documentary"...
 - ∞ The *effacement* of subject-object relat'p also suggests *effacement of subjectivity itself*...
 - ... except that, in absence of this relationship, *subjectivity* of film is *all* that's left: *first*, because it is *pure relationship of montage*; *second*, because it is *pure relationship between subjects* ("documenters"): i.e. Flury, and the "subjects" of the other photographs
 - ∞ Hence, the *only* "reality" documented here is the one *constructed through subjective relationships between found images (and fragments of images) and between documentary subjects!*

• **But**... What about a film in which *there is no montage*?? Can *this* be the way we redeem the "objective difference" doc. of documentary?

I.e. By *eschewing* montage, does documentary work get somehow *closer to reality* (the *uninterrupted flow of life*) in a way that *distinguishes it* from non-documentary?

• **[Slide 13] Stills from *People's Park***

◊ **[Ask]** Without addressing anything of the *context* of this film (which we'll do momentarily), can we find anything in *People's Park* that distinguishes this film *ontologically* or *formally* from previous films?

> No montage... but there is still—**always**—*the frame*... hence, there is *selection*... and thus, *mediation/intervention*

> Note too: there is also clearly *performance*... The very presence of camera/crew *elicits* responses, hence *inflects* so-called "objective" reality...

- ~ ***It is precisely to this relationship between camera/crew and social actors to which we will turn momentarily...***

* DEVELOPMENT

- UPSHOT: *neither ontological nor formal* thesis is sufficient to establish "documentary difference"

- We might sooner speak of *ontological fallacy* and *formal fallacy*...

• **[Ask:]** How might we express the "ontological fallacy" of documentary as "distinct"?

◊ Presumed *objectivity* of doc. image nearly *impossible* to sustain: doc. apparatus (as w/ film apparatus generally) always *inflects* "reality" (indeed, forms *part of reality*)

◊ By same token, presumed *fictionality* of fiction film also dubious: the set, the actors, the *mise-en-scène*: these *belong* to reality; they *did happen* before the camera!

> Hence, w/ respect to "reality" and "the real," documentary simply a *kind* of fiction, i.e. a *mimetic* art (*poiesis*): **LaRocca, invoking Plato: "just another form of poetic imitation"**

• **[Ask:]** How might we express the "formal fallacy" of documentary as "distinct"?

◊ *All* images are subject to *staging*, to emplotment (H. White), hence to fictionalization (J. C. Arias)

◊ Conventional cinematic techniques of fictionalization–framing, *mise-en-scène*, CGI/special effects, narrative form, etc–are (and have always been) *fully available to documentary film*...

... to same degree that traditional tools of *documentary* represent'n–interviews, archival footage, hand-held camera, etc–are (and have always been) province of *fiction films* (*Blair Witch Project*; *Borat*... but also, *Citizen Kane*)

> Nothing new: earliest docs–City Symphony Films of 1920s–claimed by both doc & avant-garde trad'ns;

> "Founding fathers" of doc (Flaherty; Grierson) not only *used* reenactments, but saw them as *necessary* for and *inherent* to doc. form (reenactment only way to show "truth")

~ Hence.: There is no exclusive "documentary film language" as distinct from language of "fiction film"; there is only "film language."

- **The Gist:**

◊ **On one hand: when engaging w/ doc.–whether as spectators or as filmmakers–we should feel unburdened by ontological and formal Q's...**

> Indeed, *all* the films we're studying today and in coming weeks are works that consciously *internalize* and *mobilize* the nebulous distinction betw. doc. and fict. on ontological/formal grounds...

◊ **On other hand: question of what documentary *is* has gotten us no closer to understanding how documentary might be *different* than non-doc film...**

IV. TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE THEORY OF THE "DOCUMENTARY DIFFERENCE (?)"

* [Slide 14] BEYOND ONTOLOGY AND FORM

- It is not that "*reality/truth*" and "*form*" are not valid things to discuss in relation to Doc...

... but they are *secondary* to understanding what *distinguishes* doc not only from other cinematic modes, but also as mode of (a/v) research

- So, if Doc neither *ontologically* nor *formally* distinct from film *per se*, then how to distinguish documentary?

• Possible Ans.: On two closely related grounds:

1. **Ethical distinction:** The unique relationship between apparatus (director, crew, equipment, producers, etc.) and actors (professional vs. social); and between apparatus and public (viewer/consumer)

2. **Political-Economic distinction:** The unique relationship between documentary object (completed film) and documentary public

> Here, respectively, 2nd/3rd frameworks mentioned at outset of class come into play,: *What documentary does? What one does with documentary?*

~ Consider ideas of Carl Plantinga, cited in LaRocca:

"To see a film nonfictionally, then, is not to see it as a document, but is rather to see it as a communicative artifact which embodies a social contract by which the audience is cued to take its representations as occurring or having occurred in the historical world. The distinction between fiction and non-fiction resides not merely in the mind of the audience or in films, but in the realm of implicit social contracts and conventions."

> Yet these "implicit social contracts and conventions," I would argue, insofar as they can sufficiently distinguish documentary film, may also re-illuminate questions of *nature* and *language* (ontology and form) in surprising ways...

~**For our purposes today, once again, we will limit ourselves to outline of ethical distinction...**

... Then develop further in coming weeks, examine its connections to "political-economic" distinction in Aula 4

* DOC APPARATUS/DOC ACTOR RELAT'P, A.K.A. "THE DOCUMENTARY SITUATION"

- [Slide 15] A "paradigmatic" case (?): **Podwórka... again** (stills)

• Background:

◊ Lockhart goes to Lodz, Poland to research new work, happens upon children playing in courtyards; fascinated, begins to film them over 3 months. Each of the six scenes are staged by artist/director in six different courtyards...)

- ◊ While filming, Lockhart meets Milena Slowinska, who eventually becomes subject of most recent work (after 15 more trips to Poland, extensive work at home for troubled girls in Rudzienko...)

Review stills, analyze/assess:

- ◊ The "documentary situation" of apparatus and "actor"
- ◊ The status of "actors" in this film: What *kinds* of actors are they?
- ◊ The status/role of "apparatus" (crew)
- ◊ **[Ask]** What defines the "documentary situation" in Lockhart's film, i.e. the particular relationship between *apparatus* and "actors"?
 - > First: these are not *professional* actors who *exchange* performance for *money* (i.e. who *own* the "rights" to their own image)...
 - ... But rather, *social* actors who agree to *cede* rights to their image... (generally in exchange for nothing)
 - ~ But **ojo**: they are also "false pretenders" (LaRocca) "acting" w/in narr. structure
 - > At same time... film is produced by not just "director" Sharon Lockhart, but 2 cinematographers + asstnt, sound recordist, prod'n asstnt, editor + asstnt, sound editor, mixer, producers... and more importantly, by *galleries, curators*...
 - ... in other words, several intersecting *institutional apparatuses* (film world; art world) are also the "authors" of the work, residing behind only *apparently* direct relationship between doc. subject (Lockhart) and doc. actors (children of Lodz)

- [Slide 16] A "limit" case? *People's Park*

- Background:

- ◊ Sniadecki, of SEL at Harvard (anthro doc stud. specializing in China) visits People's Park 2007 while working on diff. film; returns 2011 w/ Cohn (Yale stud.) to make film, only later decide to shoot in one take
- ◊ Filmmakers spend week mapping/choreographing route, befriending locals, then make 23 attempts (45-100mins) over three weeks; final version: 75-min. segment of 19th try)
- ◊ Makeshift dolly w/ wheelchair: Cohn, seated, films w/ small camcorder; Sniadecki pushes chair (rigged w/ mic.); both "edit" film together; image/sound improved in post at SEL

Run Clip: *People's Park*

- ◊ **[Ask]** What distinguishes "doc. situation" in *this* film? (Different than *Podwórka*?)
- > On one hand, "social actors" not "casted"; "performances" not "staged" *per se*
- > On other, *presence of apparatus* to events is *manifest*, even *exploited*. How?

- ~ Position of camera (low); “direct address” of “actors” to camera
- ~ Express attention to “performative moments”, i.e. when “performance” of doc. subjects clearly *mirrors* “performance” of filmmakers