

A Trace of Nanook:

CINEMATIC METHODS INTERTWINING
DOCUMENTARY AND FICTIONAL STYLES

Nanook spears Ogiuk, The Big Seal, through a hole in the ice.
He starts to reel in his prey. At the other end of the rope, the seal fights for its life.
After struggling for a while, Nanook falls head over heels onto the ice.
Sliding towards the whole, he battles the heavy animal.
The tug-o-war between man and seal continues for some time.
The man falls back, making somersaults, sliding in his thick fur pants
like in a slapstick comedy.

The last shot is precisely composed, his friends appear on the horizon,
hastening to help him.

They arrive just in time...

Robert Flaherty: *Nanook of the North* (1922).

ALLAKARIALLAK AS NANOOK

In 1920, the adventurer and explorer Robert J. Flaherty arrived at Hudson Bay in northern Canada to make a film about the life of the local Itivimuit people. This man who appeared with his strange contraptions aroused curiosity, but when he tried to explain his plan, the potential actors simply laughed at the idea of “pictures in which they moved”.¹ To illustrate his intentions the explorer filmed a man by the name of Allakariallak, hunting, and showed the test film in his cabin. When the familiar figure began to emerge out of the scintillating image of light and shade, the audience sat transfixed. They were baffled. After all, Allakariallak was sitting in the audience. On seeing him spear a struggling walrus with his harpoon, they stood up, shouted encouragement and tried to climb over the chairs to help their comrade who was battling his prey imprisoned in an image.²

Thereafter, the explorer shot a film with the members of the tribe. Allakariallak became the film’s main character, Nanook.³ It would be as “Nanook” that Allakariallak would become known in cities around the world. Flaherty’s film *Nanook of the North* (1922) became an international sensation and, later, a canonised classic of the documentary genre.

The method of the *reality film* that Flaherty put into practice diverges from the way documentary has been defined and understood in the production culture of recent decades. *Nanook of the North* is not a travel film typical of its day, a travelogue – a didactic, illustrated lecture on the people of some exotic part of the world.⁴ His approach is not an unmediated observation of events adhering to the ideals of the later *direct cinema*. Above all, Nanook is a constructed, mythical tale.

Flaherty’s method was based on a staging of



real life events; the main characters would enact typical situations from their everyday lives in front of the camera.⁵ Paddling kayaks, hunting for seal or walrus, building igloos, and playing with children, were ordinary events in their lives.⁶ Nevertheless, the film is not a record of the spontaneous events of a certain period of time. Flaherty directed his main characters on location, constructing situations using effective shooting angles, to achieve dynamic compositions and dramatic tensions.⁷ Flaherty's approach can also be described as a staging of the memory of a vanishing time. In his film he reconstructs a disappearing way of life as though it were happening at the time of filming. This is especially apparent in both *Nanook* and in his film *Moana – A Romance of the Golden Age* (1926) where the main characters re-enact out rituals and customs that, at the time of filming, had already perished under the influence of western culture.⁸

Nanook is the mythical character of a story world. He is played by Allakariallak, a real North-Canadian Inuit and native of Baffin Island. His performance is not based on the mimicry of *being someone else*. Instead, Nanook is, presumably, very much like Allakariallak, even though Nanook is a mythical character created by the director. In the story world of the film, Allakariallak has left his historical body and become another, Nanook, a primitive man struggling against the forces of nature to provide food for his 'family', which the director modelled on the nuclear family of the West.

Since the early days of the genre, Flaherty has been criticised for taking a nostalgic view of the

reality that he depicted. John Grierson, in particular, wrote in critical tones about the romanticised approach of the films of his mentor. The later criticism of Flaherty's approach has been both justified and inevitable, since transmitting meanings from one culture to another is never a simple act. Post-modern theorising of the complexities of representing otherness has addressed the problems of the cultural heritage of Eurocentricity and colonialism. Criticism of Flaherty's approach has, however, often confused the approach he used with the ideological biases of the representation. Flaherty's cinematic method, the staging of situations and the directing of events on location, has come to signify a distortion of reality, in the critics' eyes.

The idea of the story film, which would be shot in the authentic setting with authentic people acting the main roles, was revolutionary in the American film production of the silent-film era. These ideals immediately emerged, for example, in the early days of post-war Italian neorealism. Luchino Visconti's *The Earth Trembles* (*La Terra Trema*, 1948) and Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (*Germania anno zero*, 1947) are both examples of films in which the filmmakers strived to achieve a documentary-like authenticity by situating the events in authentic settings and by using as actors ordinary people connected with the events in the narrative. Even though the birth of the documentary, and especially the anthropological film, was later grounded in Flaherty's production, his work can also be seen primarily as part of the development of the realistic style in cinema.



Dziga Vertov: *A Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)

FORBIDDEN MISE-EN-SCÈNE AND THE DENIAL OF STYLE

Documentary was from the beginning—when we first separated our public purpose theories from those of Flaherty—an 'anti-aesthetic' movement. We have all, I suppose, sacrificed some personal capacity in 'art' and the pleasant vanity that goes with it.

John Grierson

The postmodern debate of the 1980s and 1990s sparked a crisis of 'the real'. The epistemological foundations of documentary realism and the ideals of objective observation were called into question. The boundaries of the genre were extended and blurred, as the exploration of subjectivity became a crucial trend in the new documentary approach of the era.⁹ I would maintain that, despite the post-vérité turn in documentary expression, in the documentary-film-making community, at-

titudes towards the *excessive* control of cinematic devices are still complex. The ethos of politically and socially oriented documentary filmmaking in particular is still fundamentally based on a dualist conception of style and form as being subordinate to subject matter and content.

In 2002, the Danish film director Lars von Trier drew up his Dogma rules for the documentary film. Von Trier's purging of the genre was aimed at producing the same result as his Dogma-95 theses, which he had created for the fiction film. By following the rules, documentaries would become *more authentic, more honest* and *more truthful*. In 'Doguments', as documentaries made according to the dogma rules have subsequently been called, the editing has been made visible by marking all the clips with 6-12 black frames. Added music cannot be used, only sounds from the original situation. Trier also categorically forbade direction or mise-en-scène, lighting or hidden cameras, and the use of archive footage.





Frederick Wiseman, *Follies* (1967)

In the history of the documentary genre – especially in the Anglo-American tradition – an unconscious assumption has become embedded in the ideals of documentarism: as cinematic style and directorial control increase, the content dissolves like gold in *aqua regia*.^{*} The American film theorist Bill Nichols has called documentary film a “discourse of sobriety”.¹⁰ Nichols articulates the central assumption of the genre: a documentary film is more about content, subject matter and information than about form, style or pleasure. A documentary is expected to divulge *information* about reality, and any use of expressive devices is supposed to be on the terms dictated by the subject matter.

It is assumed that documentaries express *arguments*, *evidence* and *information* about reality, and the more reticent, invisible and modest the use of stylistic devices, the more likely we are to get pure content – without any unhealthy additives. Refraining from excessive directorial input and puritanism with regard to cinematic expres-

sion are a guarantee of authentic and ethical documentary representation. As Nichols noted: “The credo that a good documentary is one that draws attention to an issue and not itself follows from the documentary’s epistemic foundations. Engagement is the aim more than pleasure.”¹¹

Direct cinema and the style of self-denial

*...the whole effort in documentary is to capture certain aspects of reality and not to manipulate it. If you are interested in telling people how to act, then you should work with actors.*¹²

Frederick Wiseman

*One common but misleading way of defining documentary from the point of view of the filmmaker is in terms of control: documentary filmmakers exercise less control over their subject than their fictional counterparts do.*¹³

Bill Nichols

^{*}Aqua regia is a mixture of nitric acid and hydrochloric acid, and is one of the few substances able to dissolve gold.

The tradition of refusing to stage or direct situations is derived from the way that practitioners of observational documentary, especially of 1960s American direct cinema, defined the principles of their approach. In direct cinema the ideal of ‘non-directing’ is manifested in a prohibition on intervening in the flow of events. Direct cinema filmmakers relied on chance; on informatively and dramaturgically meaningful moments occurring in front of the camera without the filmmaker influencing them.

Subsequently, the aesthetic possibilities of the observational documentary were minimized by a collection of puritanical rules: Don’t use lighting! Don’t arrange things! Don’t interfere with the flow of events! Many of the movement’s pioneers began to exhibit signs of self-denial when speaking and writing about the new mode of documentary. The documentary mode was defined by a prohibition of style. These ideals are reminiscent of an almost religious ascetic devotion. It was as if subordinating the cinematic gaze to a puritanical attitude – a kind of aesthetic fasting – would give direct access to the innermost secrets of reality.

The writings and proclamations of the pioneers of direct cinema emphasize the observation of situations without the filmmaker’s intervention. Because interfering with the ‘natural’ flow of events in order to deliberate about lighting, composition and camera angles was almost a taboo, for decades, precariously shaky hand-held images, unhurriedly unfolding situations and graininess were to be the primary characteristics of the documentary style. The saying

“The bigger the grain the better the politics” aptly captures the mentality still hidden at the core of documentary expression. In the documentary genre, ‘spontaneous’ and ‘haphazard’ have come to mean ‘true’, ‘genuine’ and ‘politically significant’, creating a kind of *styleless style* that gives the viewer a guarantee of the authenticity of the situations and of what has happened, despite the presence of the film crew. Viewers identify constructed and staged scenes that are overly well-lit and excessively well-composed with the fictional and non-documentary.

“Implicit in a camera style is a theory of knowledge,” as David MacDougall writes.¹⁴ In the core of the observational documentary film lies the definitional anchoring of the documentary approach in the representation of immediacy and hence, in the *style of immediacy*. Beneath the epistemological foundation of the observational mode is a conception of reality as spontaneous incidents and *happenstance*, as something that *happens* without the filmmaker’s intervention.

The assumption that a documentarist *controls* what happens in front of the camera less than a fiction-film director does has taken hold within the genre. Concealed within this notion is an assumption that documentary filmmakers do not primarily *direct* their films, but instead record, observe, explain or comment on what they see in a social or historical reality, as though their primary goal was the control of content and subject matter, and not of the film’s visual, stylistic or narrative coherence. Accordingly, *mise-en-scène* is considered to be something fundamentally *non-documentary*.



Though much beauty exists in documentary films, it tends to be more functional, sparse and austere than the beauties offered by fictional films. Also, documentary filmmaking offers more that would be described as professional skill than as personal style; communication rather than expression is what the documentary filmmaker is usually after. Consequently the audience is responding not so much to the artist (who keeps undercover) as to the subject matter of the film (and the artist's more or less covert statements about it).¹⁵

Jack C. Ellis & Betsy A. McLane

The bright-eyed enemy

The producer-documentarist John Grierson has written about the dangers of excessive aestheticism as the “bright-eyed enemy”, who could at any moment slip past the defences of any earnest documentarist. For him, the ‘aestheticism’ of film and art was downright harmful in a documentarism that sought to uncover social reality.¹⁶ Grierson’s starting point was a socio-political one, and more closely linked to the discourse of social-science than to film aesthetics. His was a mission to educate and enlighten. He understood the task of the new ‘documentary’ film form as being primarily to educate individual citizens to be capable of rational decision-making.¹⁷

Throughout the decades, the ideas of this socially aware reformer have underpinned the ethos of social documentarism. Especially in the Anglo-American documentary film tradition, the influence of the Griersonian documentary movement has been substantial. And yet, despite Grierson’s

anti-aestheticism, the films of the British Documentary Film Movement were highly *directed* in their cinematic style. The use of montage, controlled composition, staging and other devices of the ‘fictional’ film constituted a natural component of Grierson and his colleagues’ vision of the socially conscious, educational propaganda film that would elevate the mood of the nation. He had made a close study of the films and ideas of Sergei Eisenstein and was the first to introduce his work to the British public.¹⁸ The influence of the Russian filmmaker-theorist’s montage techniques can be seen in the *didactic dramas* of the British Documentary Movement.

The denial of both style and direction combines in an interesting manner with ethical requirements. Elizabeth Cowie has pointed out that an ethical and moral demand for a separation of the real from the imaginary is central to Western culture. The Modernist drive towards scientific objectivity was incorporated into the cinematic project right from its inception. In contrast, according to Cowie, Sigmund Freud challenged the simple assumption of a difference between the real and the imaginary.¹⁹ This distinction has taken on concrete form in the obsession with maintaining the purity of the documentary and fictional genres. An attempt has been made to exclude things that belong in the realm of the fabricated, the imagined, the emotions, aesthetics, desire and pleasure from what we think of as the documentary at its ‘purest’.

The way in which Bill Nichols associates the specificity of the documentary with the tension between portraying people living in history and

aesthetic engagement is revealing. As he writes, “The issue of magnitude involves a tension between the representation and the represented as experienced by the viewer. Remove this tension, enter a realm of *aesthetic* engagement, and the specific qualities and questions of documentary no longer apply.”²⁰ This idea contains a hint of the mistrust that has been directed at the *aesthetic* by the definers of the genre. Bearing witness to something that happens in history and, on the other hand, maintaining a commitment to style and film aesthetics are seen as two opposite poles that counterbalance one another in an inverse relationship. As one increases, the other must decrease. According to Nichols, the *issue of magnitude* goes beyond formal pattern per se and the search for structure and style, because these are achievements that afford a satisfaction that is fundamentally aesthetic.²¹ Nichols’ thinking contains the tacit assumption of a point of culmination, at which the documentary ends, and where the *solely* aesthetic begins. The ideal of a denial of style is still present at the core of the documentary genre, despite the revolutions of recent decades. A quest for the ‘political’, ‘direct’ and ‘socially significant’ documentary tends to involve a purging of the vanity of style. A self-denying Puritanism, the discourse of sobriety still lives on in the subconscious of the documentary genre.

IMPROVISED ETHNOGRAPHY AND RE-ENACTED DEPRIVATION

For me, as an ethnographer and filmmaker, there is almost no boundary between documentary film and films of fiction. The cinema, the art of the double, is already a transition from the real world to the imaginary world, and ethnography, the science of the thought systems of others, is a permanent crossing point from one conceptual universe to another; acrobatic gymnastics where losing one’s footing is the least of the risks.²²

Jean Rouch

In Jean Rouch’s *Moi, un Noir* (1958), set in the outskirts of Abidjan in Ivory Coast, three young African men – immigrants from Niger who live in the slums and make a living from casual work – present their own story based on their life experiences in improvised and re-enacted scenes. Rouch described his film as a portrayal of the fears, dreams and psychological conflicts encountered by the generation of Africans living amid the conflicting pressures of their traditions in the face of Western influences.²³

Moi, un Noir came about in collaboration with the main characters. The leading role is played by an enthusiastically boxing and hard-working longshoreman who is sporadically employed at the docks. His friends call him Edward G. Robinson, after an actor he admires. Edward G. Robinson, alias Oumarou Ganda, is also the narrator of the film. Rouch showed the edited



version of the film – shot without sound – for Ganda and asked him to improvise a commentary for it. The young dock worker interpreted his own undertakings, as well as those of the other main characters with humorous and self-ironic commentary.

In their roles, the main characters switch back and forth between their real identities and their self-created imaginary world. The film is a fantasy documentary. It is an evocation of the process of cultural assimilation, in which it is impossible to draw a clear line between what is genuine and what is foreign and adopted. In this hybrid situation the young men in the film have built up a mythology populated by stars of the Western entertainment industry, in which fantasy and reality are mingled. The boundary between imagination and what really happens is irrelevant, since in their minds daydreaming about women, money, becoming world champion boxers, and likewise identifying themselves with American film stars, are all intertwined with their daily wandering of the streets and docks of the city in the hope of finding odd jobs.

In his ethnographic films shot in West Africa in the 1950's, Jean Rouch combines performance with spontaneous observation, and fantasy material with historical reality, thereby blurring the distinctions between fiction and documentary film. Rouch's approach can be described as 'improvised ethnography'. *Le Jaguar* (1954/1962), *Moi, un Noir* (1958) and *La Pyramide humaine* (1957) were based on re-enactments of incidents arising out of actual situations in the lives of the protagonists. In these ethno-fictions, the main characters im-

provoked the incidents both in front of the camera as well as when commenting on the edited material in the sound studio. Rouch called his approach "shared anthropology".²⁴ Rouch is not primarily concerned with explaining or modelling, but rather with creating – in cooperation with his characters – cinematic scenes, which embody his reflections on particular cultural constructions, social traditions and myths. These scenes are not based on a spontaneous observation of reality in the manner of direct cinema. They happen for the film. They are catalyzed by the process of film-making.

Rouch directed some of his ethno-fictions before the technological revolution that made the direct documentary possible. No technology suitable for synchronous recording yet existed, and Rouch experimented with a kind of pseudo-synchronous recording using clumsy and laboriously 'portable' recording equipment.²⁵ He used a primitive hand-wound 16 mm camera, which allowed him to shoot for only 20–25 seconds at a time.²⁶ The approach and style of the films are determined by their technical limitations. The scenes are rather like sketches, and the representation of time and place fragmentary. The films, shot without synchronised sound, resemble 8 mm home movies.

Numb observation and shared ethnography

In his ethno-fictions Rouch rejects the tasks of recording and objective observation, which later became a dominant methodology in ethnographic



Jean Rouch: *Moi, un noir* (1958) and *Le Jaguar* (1954/1962)

film.²⁷ For him, dreams, interpretations and fantasies were also meaningful sources of ethnographic knowledge and understanding.²⁸ Jean Rouch anticipated the concerns of shared ethnography, which numerous writers raised in the post-modern ethnographic theory of the 1980s and '90s.²⁹ The discussion has re-evaluated the methodology of the conventional ethnographic film and its foundations in the approach of external and neutral observation.

For example, the maker and theorist of anthropological films David MacDougall calls the puritanical, observational ethnographic film *numb observation*.³⁰ The puritanical observational attitude leads to an asceticism, in which "filmmakers exclude themselves from the world of their subjects and the subjects from the world of the film. The observers and the observed exist in separate worlds". This produces films that are monologues rather than dialogues, as MacDougall writes.³¹ Correspondingly, Stephen Tyler disputes the con-

ventional methodology of written ethnographic research, declaring that post-modern ethnography "is the name for the end of a kind of writing that begins by reading".³² He challenges the ideals of 'plain-style' in scientific writing, taking up what Rouch had already put into practice in his films thirty years earlier. Paul Stoller carries on Tyler's ideas. According to him, the plain style of conventional ethnographic film and research reduces the complexity of the world to simple structures, principles, laws and axioms. The conventional scientific discourse has little space for metaphor, for poetic images, or for evocative prose, which are accommodated only as complementary to the text. As Stoller writes, only something that is expressed in simple, bloodless sentences or numb, indifferent images is accepted as being scientifically valid.³³ Ethnographic films and documentaries, in which the expression is subordinate to the mediation of information and to the ideals of *styleless style*, reduce film to an information commodity.



Paul Stoller adapts the viewpoint of William James' radical empiricism, which derives from American pragmatism – an approach that is also linked with Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology – in his envisaging of a theoretical foundation for a new kind of anthropology. The starting point for radical empiricism is the philosophy of being in the world, a philosophy in which artificial metaphysical boundaries – those between experience, reality, reason, faith, the self and action – have been dissolved. Extending the radical empiricism into a theory of anthropology, Stoller conceives of an approach that has numerous parallels with MacDougall's. A radically empirical anthropology is an anthropology done in the field, in which theory is not of primary importance for describing observations. *Thinking* is neither more important nor a higher way of producing knowledge than *feeling*. Nor is seeing any higher than the 'lower' senses – such as touching, smelling or tasting. In empirical anthropology,

the aim is a disciplined introspection, in which the researcher is not just a passive observer. It is an anthropology that also recognizes blatant incongruities, confounding ambiguities and seemingly intolerable contradictions, Stoller writes.³⁴

In his ethno-fictions and anthropological research, Rouch prefigured the ideals of radical empiricism. He did not adopt the position of a neutral and non-participating observer. Instead, his ethnographic observations arose out of the interplay between the filmmaker and the subjects. His intention was to tell cinematic stories rather than to merely express unambiguous information. Rouch did not model, delimit, analyse or seek out fixed 'truths' about other cultures. Rather, he told us about his observations and interpretations using poetical cinematic expression, in which meanings were not primarily bound to permanent, verifiable facts.

François Niney describes *le documentaire joué* or *le documentaire à la fiction* as a mode of film-



Jean Rouch: *Le Jaguar* (1954/1962) and *La Pyramide humaine* (1957)

making that combines documentary material with *mise-en-scène*. *Documentaire joué* – which I consider a strategy profoundly distinct from the re-enactments of docudrama – is a point at which two diverging approaches of filmmaking meet. With one approach, *unexpected sights are recorded* (documentary as record) and with the other, *events are reconstructed with actors* (fiction film as fabrication).³⁵ Films in which the social actors perform or re-enact situations from their own lives within a scripted and staged story world are *documentaires joués*. In these films, certain strategies and devices have been borrowed from fiction films and adapted *to avoid making a film about something in order to make it with someone*, as Niney writes.³⁶ *Documentaire joué* is an especially apt and nuanced description of Jean Rouch's method of filmmaking, since the French expression not only means performing and acting, but also playing. The central elements of his ethno-fictions are the action and improvisation that take place in front of the camera – the play and the playing – in which ethnographic knowledge is embodied.

The romantic victims

Donigan Cumming is an American video artist and photographer, who has shot his photographic and video works with the *improvised community* of people who live a drifting existence. Drug addicts, the homeless and alcoholic hostel dwellers deliver brutally direct monologues, perform rehearsed scenes and uncontrolled outbursts for the camera. Cumming has known the majority of the main characters in his video works for a long time and has been

photographing them for years. In the credits they are referred to as actors, but by their own names, as portraying themselves.³⁷ Cumming, like Rouch, uses improvised scenes and catalyzes events in order to reveal his observations of social reality.

The main theme of Cumming's production is commenting on the conventions of social documentary. He makes visible those canons and traditions of production, reception and modes of presentation that are enacted in the practice of social documentary. Through his art he has participated in the theoretical discussion on photography since the 1980's. In that discussion, photographer theorist Abigail Solomon-Godeau, for instance, has called a primary feature of social photographic documentarism "victim photography".³⁸

A prevailing device in the tradition of social documentary has been the photographic portrayal of an individual as a victim of circumstances generated by some social breakdown; a protagonist of social disadvantage. In victim photography, the photographer bears witness to social inequalities by using 'victims' as evidence, in the same way that evidence is used in the legal system. This approach has been at the core of the documentary project ever since Jacob A. Riis aimed to bring about social reform with his slum photographs. Similarly, the photographers of the 1930s FSA project showed glorified victims of the depression staged against classic compositions defined by the tradition of fine arts. The subjects were the destitute small farmers of rural America, people who were nevertheless trying their best and thus identifying with social participation. The FSA project gave an ennobled human face to social break-



down. By individualising their subjects as a focus of sympathy and concern, these romanticised depictions of deprivation concealed the cause-and-effect relationship between political and economic policy and social breakdown.³⁹

Brian Winston highlights a corresponding tradition of victim documentary in documentary film when examining the legacy of the Griersonian documentary movement.⁴⁰ The movement's films epitomized the principles on which our current conception of social documentary has been constructed. For the first time in Western Europe, the purpose of film became education and the raising of social awareness.⁴¹ Grierson was influenced by early Soviet cinema. Despite the leftist orientation of the movement's representatives, their goals committed them, not to raising socialist revolutionary consciousness, but to building a welfare state, a project espoused by the country's conservative politicians. Under the depression of 1930s, social reforms were also on the agenda of conser-

vative politicians in Britain. The reforms originated in the idealism-based social theories and movements that arrived in Britain in the 1860s, which promoted state controlled capitalism.⁴²

After the Second World War, building the welfare state and unifying the nation took on primary importance. In his project Grierson combined social goals with government funded filmmaking.⁴³ He believed in a good totalitarianism: "You can be 'totalitarian' for evil and you can also be 'totalitarian' for good [...] So, the kind of 'totalitarianism' I am thinking of, while it may apply to the new conditions of society, has as deep a root as any in human tradition."⁴⁴ The movement's filmmakers were also influenced by Robert Flaherty's romantic approach and poetic film language. Flaherty's mythical depiction of the heroic individual was given visible form in the movement's first heroicising depictions of the working class of the 1930s. The theme of victim documentary, in contrast, emerged in the movement's films of the mid-

1930s, which, for example, dealt with unemployment, slums or poor living conditions. The working class were no longer depicted as heroes, but as victims of social upheaval. In the direct cinema of the 1960's, 'crisis structure' – putting people into adverse circumstances that give rise to dramatic tension – became a standard narrative device in documentary film, as Winston notes.⁴⁵ Crisis structure gave structural form to an idea that had become fixed at the core of the genre, of individuals as victims of circumstance, battling against forces greater than themselves. At the same time, the view that social reality is revealed via crises and conflicts also became rooted within the social-issue documentary.

Donigan Cumming is aware of the victim motif that has become a crucial part of social documentary. He plays with the strained expectations and prejudices that operate between the subjects, the filmmaker and the viewer. Cumming is outright rude, he asks questions brusquely and directly and he photographs his subjects from unapologetically close-up. If we view Cumming's works as a whole, the nature of the collaboration is revealed as friendship and the mistrust as a mere pre-planned performance. The main characters are his long-standing partners in collaboration. Colin, Colleen, Nettie, and Nelson are society's losers, but the way in which Cumming portrays them undermines the conventions of *authentic* representation of deprivation.

It is not just Cumming's method, but also his cinematic style that disrupts the conventions of both *direct* documentary and classical film narrative. The framing is excessively tight. Cum-

ming uses a small digital camera, which enables his rude, inquisitive presence. His style is unpolished and rough. He presents his subjects in violently cropped shots and shows only fragmented portraits of them. Cumming does not situate his subjects in a certain place or city, nor does he otherwise show them in relation to the surrounding society. Instead, he shows the main characters' immediate physical environment very precisely and in detail. They are cut off from their history and environment, distorted by indecent close-ups, as though disfigured.

Tom Gunning describes the early cinema of the beginning of the 20th century as "a cinema of attraction". Instead of concealed voyeurism, the films of the era were based on exhibitionistic performances.⁴⁶ Early cinema was an astonishing display, a show. Much like these early films, Cumming's works are stripped of storylines and plot structures. The works are, nevertheless, based more on repulsion than on attraction. Cumming does not construct a coherent narrative or a complete portrait of the people he portrays. The viewer is made to stare at the subjects and the unbearable chaos of their homes, at painfully intimate moments, with close-up shots of people sweating and trembling.

As Philip Rosen has observed, the pursuit of the social documentary as defined by Grierson was related to the idea of a harmoniously shared social rationalism. The filmmaker was an educator who passed on information to the masses. Philip Rosen wrote, "We have returned to one of the semantic origins of documentary, teaching and warning."⁴⁷ The Griersonian conformist mission of advocacy assumes that there is a social commitment that ev-



Donigan Cumming: *Erratic Angel* (1998)



eryone shares or would like to share – regardless of gender, age, social class, place of birth, sexual orientation or ethnic background.

In Cumming's works, the trajectory of the victim motif is no longer solely controlled by the filmmaker. He does not portray his main characters as demoralised by their own helplessness. He does not use them as glorified witnesses to legitimize his own arguments. Nor does Cumming use the fates of his main characters to construct a clearly delineated tale of deprivation, which would allow a sentimental, pre-programmed moment of consumption. The main characters are active protagonists, themselves aware of the causes and effects of their social status.

[...] *The mise-en-scène and its social actors will appear to be unrealistic if they do not confirm or conform to the expectations of the viewers. The poor, for example, must appear properly poor in whatever way an audience may currently recognize poverty. Reality – such as the reality of poverty – is coded, it is read through conventionally understood signs.*⁴⁸

Elizabeth Cowie

When deconstructing the conventions of social documentary, Cumming does not merely adopt the stance of “oppositional postmodernism”.⁴⁹ In his work, he does not maintain that all claims of reality would be impossible. He takes a stand and makes social observations, despite the fact that his claims are not rhetorically clear and predetermined. His political stance is not encapsulated in a ritual of sympathy and empathy; he is neither an apologist nor an advocate for his subjects.

Bill Nichols has introduced the concept of ‘embodied knowledge’ which is related to his discussion of performative documentary.⁵⁰ In Cumming's case, not only can we talk about embodied knowledge, but also about *embodied politicality*. Cumming's social and political observations are explicitly bound up with both his emotions and experiences and those of his main characters. He is not just an intermediary between institutional power and ‘us’, someone who informs us about the injustices that the social actors are subjected to. This kind of politicality and political documentary is not instrumental. The filmmakers and subjects are conflicted human beings bound to their own emotions, experiences and viewpoints. Cumming's method can be seen in relation to what Nichols has written about performative documentary; “social actors no longer serve, here, as witnesses or experts, examples or illustrations, not even as voices of authenticating testimony regarding lost or repressed histories. Pleas of charity and cries of outrage recede; different voices, less exhortatory than personal, more exploratory than conclusive, speak.”⁵¹

As Jean Rouch did in his ethno-fictions, Cumming similarly provokes and catalyzes events in his films. His method is to use staged performances and to direct his main characters as if they were fictional actors. His subjects also take advantage of the space given for them; the performance catalysed by the filmmaker is constructed by the subjects themselves. In *Erratic Angel* (1998) there are two narrators, Cumming himself and his ‘subject’ Colin Kane. They both have their own agendas, partly shared, but also clashing and unpredictable in their effects.



Ulrich Seidl: *Animal Love* (1995)

DOCUMENTARY, MISE-EN-SCÈNE AND THE STYLE OF EXCESS

In the mainstream tradition of documentary film, constructing a *diegetic* story world has not been essential. Especially in approaches based on commentary or interviews, more important than the coherence of the story is the treatment of the theme or the consistency of the argument. Even in *Nanook*, the structure of the story is looser than in a classic fictional narrative.⁵² Nichols sums up his view of the difference between fictional and documentary realism as follows: “In fiction, realism serves to make a plausible world seem real, in documentary, realism serves to make an argument about the historical world persuasive.”⁵³ His idea is that documentaries primarily bear witness to things that exist in history, while fiction creates a coherent imagi-

nary world whose characters we are supposed to identify with.

Observational documentaries and, above all, classical direct cinema documentaries marked a shift in the use of non-diegetic devices. The viewer was positioned, in the same way as in a fiction film, as an invisible observer. David MacDougall makes the same observation: “Many of us who began applying an observational approach to ethnographic filmmaking found ourselves taking as our model not the documentary film as we had come to know it since Grierson, but the dramatic fiction film, in all its incarnations from Tokyo to Hollywood.”⁵⁴ Paradoxically, direct cinema, and the *style of authenticity* that is rooted in it, crucially draws upon a film tradition that is archetypically ‘fictional’.

Models (1998) is director Ulrich Seidl's documentary film about Austrian photographic models. The film is a staged documentary in the same sense as Flaherty's *Nanook*. The main characters



are real models working in the fashion industry. Vivian, Lisa, Tanja and Elvyra, act out fragments of their own lives in film sequences constructed with precise compositions. They argue with their boyfriends in their bedrooms, meet their lovers in hotels, take drugs and vomit in their bathrooms. Seidl does not film situations spontaneously as in observational documentaries. He does not interview the models, nor do they react to the presence of the camera. The main characters are *somewhere else*, in the film's diegetic world just like the actors in fiction films. In the film, there is a tension between the illusion of the invisibility of the camera and the self-conscious performances of the main characters. The controlled compositions and staged situations disrupt the assumption of spontaneous observation and the *style of immediacy* associated with documentary – especially in the conceptions of direct cinema.

The theme of a film made according to the ideals of puritanical direct cinema has to be something that happens spontaneously without the filmmaker's interference. The approach requires events in which the dramatic tension and narrative structure was 'ready-made'. When addressing questions about current social reality, the filmmaker faces a dilemma: how do abstractions such as money, power or social injustice appear – where and how do they *happen*.

The dialectic relationship between event and *non-event* is a key in understanding the method used by Ulrich Seidl in his films. Seidl does not primarily approach social reality as events that happen to occur in front of the camera. He does not solely observe the free and spontaneous

flow of events, but rather dramatizes and stages scenes in which the main characters perform their lives. He creates condensed narration, coercing the events in his subjects' lives into crystallised fragments with staged and highly composed shots.

In observational documentaries the perception of being present at a particular historical moment is strong. The viewer is convinced that the filmmaker has been witnessing the undisturbed flow of time and the particular historical moment portrayed in the film. Even though the filmmaker inevitably inserts his own ideologically biased interpretations of the contexts surrounding the presented moments, in observational documentary the sense of historical specificity is, nevertheless, quite powerful.⁵⁵ In Seidl's and Flaherty's approach, the representation of time, narrative elements and thematic motifs is compressed and condensed. One image or scene does not refer primarily to a specific moment in history. Both directors present sequences of typical, recurring events related to the main characters' lives, but in the composition of the film as a whole these events take on a meaning that goes beyond the concrete situation.

Nichols describes *history*, *story* and *myth* as three axes that are in play when representing people in documentaries and it is in the tension between them that the representation of historical reality takes place. While documentary subjects are both agents in history and characters in the film's narrative, on occasion, they also take on the properties of mythical figures. Nichols uses the term *social actor* to describe the two dimen-



Ulrich Seidl: *Animal Love* (1995)

sional task that the people in documentaries have; they are agents of both history and narration. In documentaries, these characters can be constructed as complex, ambivalent or stereotypically simplified.⁵⁶ However the characters are represented, only a fraction of their historical counterpart is revealed.

With classical direct cinema, character-based narrative has already become an accepted means of documentary expression. However, the act of attaching the elements of myth to a real person is controversial in relation to the presumptions of authenticity applied to the genre. Both by associating mythical properties with people and constructing them as characters in a story, historical people are given features that magnify or reduce the dimensions of their real lives.⁵⁷ Transformed into a mythical figure, Nanook has become "larger" than Allakariallak; 'he' has lost his historical specificity and a large portion of his human characteristics. In a sense, this always happens. As

the subject of a film, a historical person is transformed into something else. Nevertheless, in observational documentary the style of immediacy causes friction and keeps us conscious of the specificity of the historical moment. The people stay within the scale of their temporality.

Nichols argues for an expression in which history and historical individuals would be represented not as being enclosed within the narrative, nor as permanent and simplified. "This very process of mythologization works in two directions, transforming the dead into the eternally remembered and taking from the living something of their historical specificity," he has written. "Once made into an icon, symbol, or stereotype, the individual is erased."⁵⁸ Nichols emphasises the simplifying tendencies inherent in constructing icons or myths. Entering into the area of myth can, however, be seen not only as a simplification, but also as a possibility for expanding upon the representative capabilities of the subject matter. Seidl and



Flaherty dissolve the individual – tied to a certain time and place – so to be able to express something timeless.

One interesting question is whether a documentary has to be bound to temporality and specificity in order to remain a documentary. Defamiliarization – as defined by formalists as being the purpose of all art⁵⁹ – virtually requires a loss of all traces of particular and historical specificity. Almost every master piece of art history has lost its connection with the historical individual who was the model for the picture.

In applying the idea of condensed expression to Seidl's and Flaherty's approach, I understand this kind of device also as a possibility for achieving something that would not be possible by observing the spontaneous flow of events. The people are disengaged from their temporality. In *Models*, Seidl does not primarily tell us about these specific photographic models or about certain periods in their lives, but rather sets them up

to represent his idea of the way the appearance industry commodifies women. The main characters carry the narrative forward like the characters in a fictional film; they are agents of the narrative. But through his stylistic strategies Seidl even goes beyond this. By constructing tableau shots where the thematic elements are presented in a condensed form, Seidl forces his main characters to appear as iconic and mythical figures.

In his film *Jesus, You Know* (*Jesus du weißt*, 2003) Seidl deals with issues of faith and transcendence from the viewpoint of people's personal relationship with God. He places the main characters, praying, into highly composed tableaux and static stages. They surrender to the most intimate rituals of faith in front of the camera. They talk to Jesus casually as though to a friend, telling Him about the everyday crises and relationships in their intimate lives, as befits the western individualist practice of religion. In this film, the iconic nature with which the filmmaker is playing transcends

the Peircean semiotic application of the concept. The connection between the theme and the style in this film reminds us of the origins of the word iconic, since iconic art, as a ritualistic way of making images, gives form specifically to the transcendent. Icons are not merely symbolic images, since the object of faith is understood to exist and is believed to be true. It is considered to be as real as –if not more so than –the *real* world. An icon is an image that depicts something that cannot be depicted, but which is believed to exist.

Seidl makes sacred images of people, whose relationship with transcendence is astonishingly commonplace, trivial and worldly. In doing so, he uses his compositions to show us something that a conventional, spontaneous recording of an act of prayer could not reveal. He shows the paradox of the faith of the contemporary Western individual: the sacred has become profane.

The documentary authenticity is bound to the expectation that the documentarists should convey reality in a manner consistent with the worldview of their subjects. In Seidl's documentaries, however, the style is forceful and obtrusive. It transcends its subjects' 'own voice'. Through the visual style - without an explicit commentary – Seidl constructs a "tone" that guides the way we perceive the characters.

The concept of *excess*, introduced by Kristin Thompson, relates to Seidl's expression. *Excess* is something that is not necessary to create the spatial and temporal continuity of the film.⁶⁰ The *excessive* stylistic devices are not essential for an understanding of the film's narrative, but rather they function as a means to create an overall tone

through which we perceive the film. The dominant style in Seidl's films resembles that of Jacques Tati, who constructs comical observations of modern civilization by using dense expression. In his films, the plot structure is secondary; they do not rely on a classic narrative based on spatial and temporal continuity. What is more important is inducing a certain way of observing things, through which the director reveals the archetypal comicality of our visual environment.⁶¹ Tati uses visual style to construct comedy, in Seidl's films style helps to create a disconcerting atmosphere.

Seidl does not appeal to our capacity for identification with the aid of a fluent and transparent narrative or a fictional psychological realism, nor with the use of the style of authenticity of conventional direct documentary. With the aid of style, he shows the everyday and the archetypal differently. Seidl shows humankind as brutal, but does not provide an opportunity for the viewer to empathize emotionally. Using a rigid style, the viewer is kept at a distance as anecdotal situations are closed off without explanation. He shows the ordinary and everyday, in a way that is typical of western civilisation, yet a way that makes the ordinary appear strange. For example, *Animal Love* (*Tierische Liebe*, 1995), set in the modern city of Vienna, is a study of the emotional ties between people and their pets. The director places the people with their cats, dogs, guinea pigs and rabbits on the stages of their homes and in archetypal suburban garden landscapes in a way that makes western people's relationship with animals appear strange and almost perverse.



Ulrich Seidl: *Models* (1998) and *Animal Love* (1995)





Michael Winterbottom: *In This World* (2003)

THE CINEMA OF OBSERVATION

*Model. It is his non-rational, non-logical "I" that your camera records.*⁶²

Robert Bresson

Since the pursuit of direct documentary was defined, the distinction between the documentary and the fictional has been grounded upon the difference between *being another* and *representing oneself*. As viewers, we assume that the people in documentary films are identical with historical individuals they portray.

In the mainstream tradition of documentary, the subjects are not primarily understood as characters in a story, but rather as representatives of and witnesses to the theme. In representing an individual worker, farmer or homeless person the filmmaker exhibits one person as an advocate for

all those of his or her category. The particular is made general. "Every last Inuit, industrial worker, deep sea fisherman, etc., must stand on the screen both for himself and for a class of persons of his type. The actual image is of one particular person; the rhetoric of the title and the genre is of a tribe", as Brian Winston has stated.⁶³ The main characters or witnesses lend their history-bound identity as a guarantee of the outlook and viewpoint constructed by the filmmaker.

In the tradition of mainstream fiction films, the actor is a representative, who lends his or her face to the character. The identity of the real historical individuals is protected, since they are represented by *another*, the actor. With the star system, these representatives have become regularly repeated and recognizable, embodying not just their role, but also an institution formed out of themselves, their own stardom. The purity of the two film forms has relied on these two certainties. We assume that documentary subjects are

in life like they are pictured in the film, and that a famous actor hacked to bits in one role, can appear in one piece in his or her next role. As Robert Bresson writes, "The actor is double. The alternate presence of him and of THE OTHER is what the public has been schooled to cherish."⁶⁴ Bresson himself systematically refused to use professional actors in his films, and instead used "models", ordinary people who happened to resemble the characters he wished to portray.

History as setting

The ideal of authenticity in the fiction-film tradition is, above all, an aesthetic issue associated with realism. The pursuit of documentary authenticity in the fiction film tradition has, nevertheless, resulted in concrete practices of filmmaking. The method, in which the filmmaker combines fictional elements with the observations of actual history and the use of real people as characters, erases the border line between the two traditions.

For example, the films of early post-war Italian neo-realism challenged the conventions of the star system and studio film industry, as well as the tradition of psychological realism. This was particularly evident in the early phase of neo-realism, where films were shot in authentic environments and non-professionals were used as actors. The idea of acting *as being transformed into someone else* was questioned and broken down. Authenticity was sought out in a way that resembled, both socially and aesthetically, the aspirations of later direct cinema.

Roberto Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero* (*Germania anno zero*, 1947) is an example of early neo-realism. The director shot the film in a war-shattered Berlin occupied by the Allies immediately after the end of the war. Rossellini's method is reminiscent of that of Flaherty. The film's documentary quality is not based on a mere construct created by stylistic strategies, but rather on the use of a historical moment as a concrete setting. Post-war Berlin is a city in ruins, providing a scenery of devastation, and thus an authentic backdrop for the events of the film. When choosing his actors, Rossellini tried to achieve a relationship with the immediate historical moment. Even though the film's story is scripted, the director sought out ordinary Berliners who had experienced the war and the degradation that followed, to play the parts of the main characters.

With his conception of the *question of magnitude* Nichols restores the significance of the distinction between fiction and documentary.⁶⁵ Documentary, according to Nichols, is not just an aesthetic or a style. In using and showing people living in history, the documentarist is engaged with the political, physical or social realities restricting human existence in a more profound way than a fiction filmmaker is.⁶⁶ But in the tradition of fiction film, reality material has been used in a way that exposes the filmmaker and viewer to ethical questions about representing people similar to the ethical questions inherent in direct documentaries.

In Michael Winterbottom's film *In This World* (2003), two young Afghan men, Jamal and Enayat, leave a refugee camp and travel thousands of kilometres across Iran, Turkey, Italy and France



Bahman Ghobadi: *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000)

seeking the promise of a better life in London. The director and scriptwriter recruited as 'actors' Anayatullah Jumaudin and 15-year-old Jamal Udin Torab from a Pakistani refugee camp. They were allowed to participate in the filming provided that they were returned to the camp afterwards. Jamal, however, used the opportunity to flee. The end of the film is shot after he has returned to London – only this time he is a *real* illegal refugee.

In this World challenges the dichotomy between fictional and documentary film. The film is scripted and the escape is arranged in order to make the film. It is a fabricated story but the filmmakers got the idea from existing circumstances, and recruited two real refugees as 'models'. The actors act out a story that intersects with their own reality and, as it were, represent imaginary refugees whose plight could be their own. Their historical situation is intertwined with the situation of the film's characters – even more than in Rossellini's films where the identity of the story characters is more

removed from that of the non-professional actors playing them. Jamal and Anayatullah are called by their real names and their real family members are introduced in the episodes filmed at the camp.

The film employs the stylistic strategies of observational documentary. Yet the *documentary value* of the film is more visceral, more ontologically challenging in nature. Although the film is indexed as being fictional, it is bound to the *orders of magnitude*.⁶⁷ Especially in the case of Jamal, the character not only borrows the name and appearance of the real person, but the two come to share an identical destiny, that of an illegal refugee immigrating without the proper documents.

As a viewer, I am unable to dismiss the film as merely imagined, acted, or fabricated. There are fissures in the representation of the imaginary, especially regarding Jamal's character. In the last sequence of the film there is a point when the fabricated story is transformed into a documentation of the real Jamal's life as an illegal refugee in London.

Documentary visions

The Kurdish-Iranian director Bahman Ghobadi's *A Time for Drunken Horses* (*Zamani baraye masti asbha*, 2000) is a film about goodness and loyalty amid the realities of deprivation and poverty. The mined, war-ravaged border region of Iran and Iraq is a landscape in which three orphaned siblings try to care for each other and raise the money for an operation for their seriously crippled brother. The film is shot in the authentic setting of Iran's Kurdistan.⁶⁸ In this film, which is neo-realistic in spirit, events held together with a simple, loose narrative framework become a part of the mountains and the barren landscape.

The conventions of psychological realism have also been broken in the Iranian films of the 1990s and 2000s, with an emergence of the ideals of documentary authenticity resembling those of early neo-realism. For example, in their films, Mohsen and Samira Makhmalbaf, Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi and Bahman Ghobadi have used non-professionals as actors and authentic settings in the manner of the neo-realists. The narrative is sketchy, loose, observational and based on more random (or ostensibly random) moments than a classical fictional narrative. In some of the films, the recording of immediate historical reality is blended with a scripted, imaginary story world. Actual and fictional material is intertwined.⁶⁹

Especially in the films of Abbas Kiarostami, the line between authentic moments and the scripted story world of the film is vague. Kiarosta-

mi himself calls his approach *an unfinished cinema*.⁷⁰ In his films *And Life Goes on...* (*Zendegi va digar hich*, 1992) and *Under the Olive Trees* (*Zire darakhatan zeyton*, 1994), he returned to the earthquake-shattered village of Koker, where he had previously shot the feature film *Where Is the Friend's Home?* (*Khane-ye dost kodjast?*, 1987). Kiarostami sought out the people who had appeared in the film to find out what had happened to them. He combined documentary observations with situations instigated for the filming. In these films, the main characters play themselves within a loose narrative framework constructed by the director. Kiarostami does not write a script, but improvises situations as the filming progresses.⁷¹ He constructs and shapes the narrative in relation to events in reality as he finds it.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar - The Sun Behind the Moon* (*Safar e Ghandehar*, 2001) is reminiscent of Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero* (1947). Makhmalbaf made his film in Afghanistan when it was still ruled by the Taliban. Like Rossellini, he shot the film in the immediate historical situation, thus also documenting the circumstances in the forbidden country. He shows grotesque, poetic sights, epitomizing the fatality of war.

The prevalent style in new Iranian film can be called the *cinema of observation*. The narrative veers away from classical psychological realism based on the shot/reverse shot technique, continuity editing, plot development and the unraveling of inner psychological motives, which Hollywood convention has made the dominant, universal style of film. Long shots govern the visual



narrative. These devices direct the gaze towards observing external circumstances rather than interpreting the psychological motives of the characters. People are situated in and as part of the landscape. The physical environment is not just a backdrop for the events, but rather a central contingency defining human existence.

This does not mean a complete rejection of *découpage*, continuity editing or other classical narrative techniques. For example, in Ghobadi's narrative we can recognize a thoroughly classical narrative structure; he creates rhythm by varying the camera angles and the sizes of the shots. However, he situates the momentous events in wide-angle shots without emphasizing the emotional reactions of the main characters by using point-of-view shots and different image sizes. He frequently ends a dramatic moment with a wide shot, and in doing so, he returns the narrative back to the state of external observation.

This kind of cinematic expression diverges



Bahman Ghobadi: *Turtles can Fly* (2005)

radically from psychological realism. The depiction of people's actions, development and aspirations is based on observation of minor changes and situations that happen in front of the camera. The films do not construct psychologically defined characters; the viewer's emotional experiences are not guided, nor are the main characters' motives revealed to the same degree as in a traditional fictional narrative. Corresponding ideals already appeared in early neo-realism. The filming of visions and duration was more important than the filming of actions, as Niney points out. According to him, neo-realist expression was based on expressing chance more than on creating a predetermined mechanical plot structure. Emphasis was on expressing discontinuity, and the presence of the characters rather than the logic of cause and effect; on expectation rather than on suspense; on the immanent nature of what is present instead of the concealed motives and internal motivations of the characters.⁷²

There is a fascinating link between the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's ideas about film as the presentation of time and the aesthetic of the new Iranian cinema. In *Cinéma I: L' image-Mouvement* (1983) and *Cinéma II: L' image-Temps* (1985) Deleuze puts forward his synthesis of the development of film, drawing on Henry Bergson's philosophy. In his articulation, or rather in his vision of the history of film, he envisages two major epochs that he describes with the terms Movement-Image and Time-Image. A fundamental disjuncture between the two major phases that emerged in modern cinema is the obliteration of the difference between the subjective and objective perceptions of an event, as well as a new way of representing space and environment, diverging from that of classical realism. In classical cinema, the representation of places and milieus is functional and therefore dictated by the requirements of the narrative.⁷³ The settings are the locations where the events take place and sub-



Roberto Rossellini: *Germany, Year Zero* (1947)

ordinate to the organic nature of the action.

As one example of this disjuncture, Deleuze mentions neo-realist cinema and especially the films of Michelangelo Antonioni and Luchino Visconti, in which milieus take on the character of autonomous material reality; they become meaningful in themselves. Places are not defined solely by the action. For example, Deleuze writes about Antonioni's films; "Antonioni's art will continue to evolve in two directions: an astonishing development of the idle periods of everyday banality; then, starting with *The Eclipse*, a treatment of limit-situations which pushes them to the point of dehumanized landscapes, of emptied spaces that might be seen as having absorbed characters and actions, retaining only a geophysical description, an abstract inventory of them."⁷⁴

A common feature of the new Iranian cinema is the placing of people in their landscape and their physical environment. The expression of duration and the use of extreme long shots give these





Bahman Ghobadi: *Turtles can Fly* (2005)

visions of landscape and space a meaning that transcends *setting* as a mere place for the action. Presentation of milieu is not subordinated to plot and action. In Ghobadi's films, the action has a realistic relationship with the milieu in which it takes place, but the durations of the images in relation to the plot development disrupt the functionality of classical narrative.

In line with Deleuze's ideas, cinema that challenges the traditional plot structure can also be called a cinema of poetry. Deleuze borrows this expression from Pier Paolo Pasolini. He refers to a cinematic language that does not primarily tell a story relying on plot structure. "In the cinema of poetry, the distinction between what the character saw subjectively and what the camera saw objectively vanishes," Deleuze writes. Point-of-view shots are not distinguished from what is seen from outside, objectively. This is not, however, done in favour of one or the other, "but because the camera assumed a subjective presence, acquired

an internal vision, which entered into a relation of simulation ('mimesis') with the character's way of seeing".⁷⁵ In Kiarostami's, Samira and Mohsen Makhmalbaf's and Ghobadi's films we can recognize poetic images and scenes that do not serve only the plot structure or the development of the action. These moments evoke meanings that cannot be reduced to mere functional elements of the linear story.

Direct cinema was the counter-cinema of its day, challenging not only the didactic, voiced-over tradition in the documentary genre, but also the emotionally leading Hollywood narratives based on determinate plot structure and psychologically predestined characters. Despite the fact that the American direct cinema tradition, in particular, adopted the means of the classical story film, the observational documentary is based on the aesthetic of slowness and duration. Classical observational documentary requires a patient gaze from the viewer.

In the tradition of fiction film, the cinema of observation employs the aesthetic characteristic of classical direct cinema. This is not, however, a matter of cheap authenticity effects. The documentary style is not some borrowed garment taken from the rhetoric of superficially understood ethicality, objectivity and politicality. The fictional context in one sense frees the observational style from an assumption of objectivity associated with the metaphor of the external, observing gaze, an assumption that still burdens this approach in the documentary film tradition. Without the assumption of an indexical correspondence between history and what is depicted in the film, the aesthetic possibilities of observational style can be more fully realized.

Use of the documentary style or approach in fiction prompts the question: Why has this aesthetic emerged specifically in this era? François Niney's idea that some clearly recognisable moral crisis, one specifically caused by catastrophe, would lead to the rise of direct, unaffected and undramatic forms of narrative, is an interesting one.⁷⁶ The attempt to achieve strict documen-

tary realism was at its most pronounced in post-war neo-realism, and likewise in American post-war cinema.⁷⁷ The aesthetic of deprivation in Iranian films takes its imagery from circumstances in which human existence has been reduced to a struggle for essential basic needs. Bystanders to history live on wastelands planted with mines scattered during pointless wars. Civilization has receded, people have returned to being a part of a cruel landscape, subject to the exigencies of a primal struggle for survival. Documentary observation underpins this manifestation of stripped-down existence.

The cinema of observation, both in documentary and in fiction, is a film of time and duration, of the patient gaze and of hidden enigmas, in which the style underpins a different way of looking at people as having been flung into their world. The cinema of observation shows humans as unresolved and unpredictable, instead of as psychologically defined and determined characters. More relevant than a logical-linear, action-advancing plot structure is showing visions of the physical environment and the human being as part of it.

Translation by Mike Garner, Susanna Helke & Mary Morgan.



¹ Flaherty 1950: 14.

² Flaherty 1950: 15.

³ Barsam 1988: 20.

⁴ The pictorial account of what is seen and experienced in exotic countries and cultures, i.e. the travelogue film, is one early form of non-fiction film. In the first half of the 20th century, many such films were made. Travelogue films carried on the tradition of the written travel accounts of the end of the 19th century. Barsam 1988: 15.

⁵ Rothman 1997: 2.

⁶ In the film *Nanook's wife* is played by one person, even though among Allakariallak's tribe it was normal for a man to have several wives. (Rothman 1997: 2).

⁷ Barnouw 1979: 38. For example, the seal-hunting scene is constructed using the means of early silent comedy. The prey on the other end of the line was already dead. (Barsam 1988: 21).

⁸ Barsam 1992: 23

⁹ Renov 2004:xxiii.

¹⁰ Nichols 1991:3.

¹¹ Nichols 1991: 179.

¹² Plantinga 1997: 37 (ff26).

¹³ Nichols 1991: 13.

¹⁴ MacDougall 1998: 202.

¹⁵ Ellis & McLane 2005: 3.

¹⁶ Grierson 1979: 112.

¹⁷ Rosen 2001: 248.

¹⁸ de Bromhead 1996:23 and Barnouw 1979: 87.

¹⁹ Cowie 1999: 19.

²⁰ Nichols 1991: 232. My italics.

²¹ Nichols 1991: 231. My italics.

²² Stoller 1992: 218.

²³ Issari & Paul 1979: 71 (ref. de Heusch 1962: 50).

²⁴ Stoller 1992:139.

²⁵ Reddy 2001: 3.

²⁶ Reddy 2001: 3 and von Bagh 1984: 162.

²⁷ See e.g. Taylor 1991: 100.

²⁸ Issari & Paul 1979: 71.

²⁹ See, e.g. Stoller 1992 and Tyler 1987.

³⁰ MacDougall 1998: 134.

³¹ MacDougall 1998: 133.

³² Stoller 1992: 200.

³³ Stoller 1992: 203.

³⁴ Stoller 1992: 212-213.

³⁵ Niney 2000: 120.

³⁶ Niney 2000:121.

³⁷ Perret 2002: 154.

³⁸ Seppänen 2001:181 and Solomon-Godeau 1991: 179.

³⁹ See e.g. Solomon-Godeau 1991: 177-178.

⁴⁰ Winston 1995: 40.

⁴¹ Winston 1988: 274.

⁴² Aitken 1998: 35.

⁴³ Winston 1988: 270-271.

⁴⁴ Aitken 1998: 37.

⁴⁵ Winston 1988: 274.

⁴⁶ Gunning 1990: 58-59.

⁴⁷ Rosen 2001: 251.

⁴⁸ Cowie 1999:30.

⁴⁹ Cf. Solomon-Godeau 1991: 182.

⁵⁰ Nichols 1994:2.

⁵¹ Nichols 1994: 2.

⁵² Cf. Paul Rotha's term *slight narrative* (Barsam 1988:10).

⁵³ Nichols 1991: 165.

⁵⁴ MacDougall 1998: 128.

⁵⁵ Nichols 1991: 249.

⁵⁶ Nichols 1991: 243.

⁵⁷ Nichols 1991: 249.

⁵⁸ Nichols 1991: 254-255.

⁵⁹ Thompson 1988: 10.

⁶⁰ Thompson 1988: 259.

⁶¹ See Thompson 1988: 248-258.

⁶² Bresson 1975: 84.

⁶³ Winston 1988: 519.

⁶⁴ Bresson 1975: 106.

⁶⁵ Nichols 1991: 231.

⁶⁶ Nichols 1991: 237.

⁶⁷ Cf. Nichols 1991: 230.

⁶⁸ Dabashi 2001: 263.

⁶⁹ Rosenbaum 2003: 4.

⁷⁰ Rosenbaum 2003: 111.

⁷¹ Rosenbaum 2003: 30.

⁷² Niney 2000: 125. We must remember that neo-realism is not a coherent movement or clearly defined style. The filmmakers themselves stress the differences in their approaches: the output of individual directors varies from the austere documentarism of the post-war period to costume dramas made in studio sets (Luchino Visconti), fantasy and fable were incorporated into realistic themes (Vittorio de Sica) and psychological-symbolic realism was founded on the charisma of star actors (Roberto Rossellini). The characteristics that Niney defined can be seen as being linked primarily with the script-writer-director-theorist Cesare Zavattini's definitions of the ideals of neo-realism.

⁷³ Deleuze 1989: 4.

⁷⁴ Deleuze 1989: 5.

⁷⁵ Deleuze 1989: 148.

⁷⁶ Niney 2000: 121.

⁷⁷ Niney 2000: 123.

