12 Realities in the Making
The Ethics of Fabulation in Observational Documentary Cinema
Ilona Hongisto

It is thus necessary to go beyond all the pieces of spoken information; to extract from them a pure speech-act, creative story-telling which is as it were the obverse side of the dominant myths, of current words and their supporters; an act capable of creating the myth instead of drawing profit or business from it.

—(Deleuze 1989, 269–70)

The above quotation from the concluding remarks of Gilles Deleuze’s *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989) presents a challenge for conventional understandings of story-telling. Story-telling, for Deleuze, is an act that is not concerned with telling a story, conveying a message, but an act that resists dominant myths. It is an act of telling that confronts current words and their supporters in favor of creating alternative visions to dominant circumstances.

The hyphen between the words “story” and “telling” is a further indication that something other than a language-based operation of sharing information is at stake here. Indeed, the form “story-telling” reflects the genealogy of Deleuze’s conceptual postulation. The hyphen can be traced back to the English translation of Henri Bergson’s *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1935, 88–89), where the French term “fonction fabulatrice” has been rendered as “myth-making function.” In Deleuze’s *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989, 150), the same term has been translated as “story-telling function”, or simply “story-telling”.

Fubilation as myth-making and story-telling are integral to Bergson’s and Deleuze’s respective projects on social cohesion and the role of images in creating social consistencies. Bergson mobilizes myth-making in his discussion of religion. Myth-making consists of creating “phantasmic representations” and “hallucinatory fictions” that have real effects (Bergson 1935, 88, 91). These representations, Bergson argues, have “semi-personal powers” and they are used in the running of “closed societies”, such as religious communities. Here, images take on the role of “efficient presences” that have the capacity to regulate group behavior. For Bergson (1935, 149, 167), myth-making is a visionary faculty that enforces closed societies (see also Bogue 2007, 91–94).
Whereas Bergson explores the controlling function of efficient presences, Deleuze finds a more affirmative side to fabulation. He speaks of the visionary faculty in relation to creating collectivities beyond those that exist in actuality. For Deleuze, story-telling creates visions, efficient presences, with which new social formations can be inaugurated. In this sense, story-telling in the arts does not enhance existing social conditions, it is an issue of “inventing a people” (Deleuze 1989, 150; 1995, 125–26; Bogue 2010, 16–18).

Inventing a people links Deleuze's notion of fabulation to the conception of observational documentary cinema followed in this chapter. Whereas observational documentaries are most often treated with a “fly-on-the-wall” rhetoric and considered in their non-participatory dimensions, this chapter looks at observational documentaries that are remarkable in their collective scope. Instead of keeping a distance, the camerawork in these films is decidedly participatory—it asserts itself as a partaker in the same unfolding reality that the filmed subjects inhabit. Consequently, the documentaries discussed here do much more than just document social groups and communities that are already in place. With their participatory dynamic, the films in question work towards efficient presences with which the beginnings of new social formations can be initiated.

This has direct implications on documentary ethics. With fabulation, documentary ethics can no longer be evaluated on the authenticity of the created representation. Instead, the ethics of storytelling is transposed to the moment of filming—to the process in which the mutual participation of the filmmaker and the filmed subjects sets forth an efficient presence that indicates how actuality could be arranged differently. In other words, ethics concerns what is created in the shared moment of filming.

The argumentation of the chapter draws from close readings of selected canonical and contemporary observational documentaries from Jean Rouch's classic Moi, un Noir (France 1958) to Roberto Minervini's The Other Side (Louisiana) (USA 2015). Although the films deal with a variety of subject matters in distinct geographical areas, they come together in a shared premise; the lives of the filmed subjects are marked by poverty, illness, racism, homophobia and trauma. Here, fabulation is a cinematic response to unsustainable conditions—a creative story-telling act that envisions how the actualities of the filmed subjects could be arranged differently. The documentaries are not didactic in style nor are the created visions verbalized explicitly. Rather, the created efficient presences take the form of a myth in the sense that the factual begins to impinge on the fictional.

The Observational Event in Documentary Cinema

Deleuze's discussion of fabulation coincides with the transition from classical to modern cinema. This is not a mere distinction in form, but a more complex articulation of the work of film in the real. According to Deleuze, classical cinema sides with narration and modern cinema with
the story (‘récit’) (Deleuze 1985, 176–79; 1989, 134–37), D. N. Rodowick (1997, 155–57) summarizes the distinction succinctly by noting that in Deleuze’s treatment narration is the kind of storytelling that maintains subjective and objective perspectives as distinct, whereas récit engages in a free indirect oscillation between the two. This chapter will address two related issues that bear directly on the present argumentation.

First, in Deleuze’s (1989, 126–37) account, classical cinema abides by a linear narrative form where attention is drawn to what happens next. This implies a cinema that emphasizes the distinctive qualities of the past, present and future. In other words, the narrative form keeps these temporal phases separate. Modern cinema, on the other hand, delves into what there is to see in an image. It draws attention to the depths and borders of the image and invites the viewer to explore simultaneous layers of time in the images. In modern cinema, we often encounter memories of the future, such as in the cinema of Chris Marker and Alain Robbe-Grillet.

Although it is not conceptually worthwhile or even interesting to try and fit observational documentary into Deleuze’s distinction between classical and modern cinema, there are elements in his articulation of the latter that resonate with the films discussed in this chapter. Namely, although observational documentary coincides most easily with the present tense, the works discussed here offer a more nuanced temporal slide. The present is framed in a way that opens it up to both the past and the future.

Second, Deleuze (1989, 147–55) argues that narration and story postulate different relationships between the true and the false. Whereas narration enforces a difference between the two by making sure that dreams and hallucinations are distinguished from ordinary reality, the story embraces the “powers of the false” in a way that ties the true to the false immanently. Fabulation in the documentary entails the creation of effective presences where the true and false are inseparable.

Deleuze’s point of entry to the immanence of the true and the false is the speech-act. Or, more precisely, he is interested in the act of speaking on camera. He notes instances in observational documentaries where the filmed subjects engage in verbal accounts where memories, perceptions, hopes and dreams intertwine with one another. He notes that although the filmed subjects “make fiction”, they are nevertheless not “fictional” (Deleuze 1989, 150). Here, making fiction is the creative story-telling act that has an immediate impact on the lives of the filmed subjects.

The two authors Deleuze considers particularly important in this regard are the French filmmaker Jean Rouch and the Canadian Pierre Perrault. Both made many of their seminal works at around the same time as modern cinema peaked in the 1950s and 1960s, and both embraced distinct styles of participatory observation. For Rouch and Perrault, participation did not entail putting themselves in the frame or making their personalities and engagi-
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personalities known on screen—rather, participation meant living with
and engaging with the daily lives of the filmed subjects, and welcoming
their views and habits as foundations in the films. For Rouch, this was
part of his anthropological inquiries in Africa and for Perrault, a prac-
tice of documenting the lives of the Québecois without resorting to the
perspectives engrained by his French-influenced upbringing in Quebec,
Canada.

These post colonial practices of participatory observation could be
paraphrased as ethnographies of the living present or as “living cinema”
(Michael 2004). In Perrault’s renowned Pour la suite du monde (Canada
1963) the living present entwines directly with the past and the future.
The documentary is set on the island of Ile-aux-Coudres, which is dem-
arcated from both the Anglophone and the French-Canadian cultures
of Quebec. The people of the island speak a distinct dialect that is hard
to understand, even for native French speakers. The distinct culture of
the island has slowly been waning and their traditions have been forgot-
ten. In the documentary, Perrault encourages the islanders to take on
fishing white beluga whales with the traditional method of erecting a
weir barrier in the St. Lawrence River. By “pushing” the islanders into
action, the making of the documentary facilitates the re-actualization of
a tradition that in the past gave the island community cohesion. The tra-
dition becomes an efficient presence that institutes a newly found sense
of community to the islanders. The created sense of community has a
direct impact on their future, as the islanders start making plans on how
fishing the beluga whales could sustain them economically in the future.
This is also referenced in the title of the film, which can be loosely trans-
lated as “for the continuation of the world”.

What is particularly noteworthy here is the speech act involved in
re-actualizing the fishing tradition. By engaging with the ancient fish-
ing techniques, the islanders speak about the traditions which underpin
their community. Their account, however, is not a factual account of the
tradition, but a “communal lore” that includes memories, beliefs and
technical details in equal measure. In this way, the tradition emerges as
an efficient presence that is the obverse side to the official histories of
decaying rituals and a struggling culture. As fact and fiction entwine,
the communal lore takes on mythical qualities, and the impact of these
qualities on the community is immediate.

Perrault and other Quebec filmmakers have often been distinguished
from their French contemporaries because of their emphasis on the
speech act. However, the Québécois “cinéma de la parole” finds an in-
teresting counterpart in Jean Rouch’s celebrated Moi, un Noir (France
1958) in which young Nigerian immigrants tell the story of their lives on
the soundtrack to images recorded on the streets of Treichville, Abidjan,
on the Ivory Coast. In the documentary, scenes filmed on the streets
are freely narrated by one of the protagonists. He speaks in the present
tense over scenes of himself and his friends. The remarkable feature of this speech act is the narrator giving them roles familiar from Western popular culture—such as Tarzan, Eddie Constantine, and Edward G. Robinson—and accounting for these fictional and celebrity characters. Consequently, the documentary creates an efficient presence where the young adults are not trapped in the everyday struggles of Nigerian immigrants on the Ivory Coast. Rather, they live the lives of a famous boxer and an actor. Here, too, the mythical qualities are apparent and their function is to create cohesion at a time of difficulty.

Deleuze names Perrault and Rouch’s method of efficient presences a “story-telling function of the poor” (1989, 150). He does this to emphasize the filmmakers’ desire to overcome their own colonizing perspectives of language and filmmaking—including the habits internalized by their respective upbringings—and to foreground the irreplaceable role of the filmed subjects in the process. Here, documentary fabulation entails giving the stage to the filmed subjects and thus facilitating the creation of myths that bear directly on the community in question.

From this point of view, fabulation raises ethical questions about the effects of the created myths. Pour la suite du monde and Moi, un Noir are relatively benign in this regard as the documentaries clearly add to the lives of the filmed subjects in their own terms. Their story-telling emerges from what they want to do or enjoy doing in life. Shirley Clarke’s observational documentary Portrait of Jason (USA 1967) is more complicated ethically, although the film shares the premise of giving the filmed subjects a stage to do what they love the most in life. Clarke’s documentary was filmed over one night in a New York City apartment where Jason Holliday, a black gay man in his forties, talks to the camera about his painful and pleasant childhood memories, his years of hustling, and his faraway dreams. Presented in chronological order, the documentary follows the changes that take place over the night as Jason gets more intoxicated from the liquor and joints he consumes while speaking. Dreaming of a nightclub act he has been planning for years, Jason not only speaks about the roles he would like to play but also takes up performing them for the camera. He sings excerpts from the musical Funny Girl in an earnest manner and thus invents himself as a nightclub actor while performing. Although the odds of him landing a role on Broadway are slim, the documentary provides him with a stage, a space he has waited for many years.

This comes with the important detail that the tiny crew consisting of Jason’s friends Richard and Carl, the filmmaker, cameraperson, and the sound recordist, prompt him from behind the camera. They ask him questions and direct him to talk about certain topics. This, it is legitimate to argue, puts Jason in a vulnerable position. However, the point here is that despite his intoxication and the prompts, Jason takes pleasure out of performing and this becomes the key to his story. In Todd Rei’s Diggers (1973), working-class poverty is the dramatic core of the documentary. The Diggers are a group of working-class sailors, and the film focused on their first outing after being released from prison. As a result of his conditions and his circumstances, the project becomes a humanistic film, and hence a film about him.
Reality Actualized

Documentary films are generally renowned for focusing on those who are excluded from official histories and who live outside normative structures. The examples above attest to the fact that documentary cinema has taken upon itself to bring the obverse side of official accounts into the frame. This is often characterized as giving a voice to those who have previously been deprived of such a privilege.

It is undoubtedly true that documentary cinema, by inviting the elsewhere into the frame, has challenged and even changed harmful assumptions about “the other”. Indeed, the documentary’s ethical work is often described as bringing alternative stories and histories into the frame. However, as the above discussion of efficient presences has already indicated, this is not enough to account for the complex ethical process that emerges at the moment of filming.

In this process, documentary cinema works in another register from the representational debate of who or what gets to occupy the frame at a given time. In his second feature documentary The Other Side, Roberto Minervini takes the viewer to the backyards of the American dream. The documentary portrays drug addicts, struggling families and para-military groups that exist outside the grid of state institutions: communities left to their own devices in the swampland of the American South. By placing these individuals in focus, the film contributes to the lineage of marginal narratives of contemporary America. But what is particularly remarkable about Minervini’s documentary is how it frames these communities.

One of the film’s protagonists is Lisa Allen, the sister of Todd Trichell whom Minervini got to know in the process of making his previous documentary Stop the Pounding Heart (2013). Whereas Todd relocated to Texas in search of a better life, Lisa stayed behind in poverty-stricken Louisiana and now shares her life with Mark Kelley, the documentary’s key protagonist. The two share their intimate and tumultuous relationship with the film crew and the viewers. This is the first outstanding feature of the documentary—each frame is imbued with often excruciating intimacy. Minervini has noted in interviews that his connection to Todd Trichell and his wife Linda, who also became the production manager for The Other Side, was seminal in building a human connection and consequently a working relationship between himself and the community; someone on the inside invited him in and hence he could be trusted. 2
Within the intimate setting, the frames capture explicit sex, drunken parenting and drug use over generations without taking a patronizing viewpoint to the lives ravaged by unemployment and methamphetamine. We see Mark injecting a heavily pregnant stripper, a mother passing the pipe on to her son, and a drunken man knocking down a young girl in her chair in an effort of playfulness. In these moments, when intervention feels most necessary, the camera keeps its observatory position and captures the events in long takes.

The persistence of the long takes, however, gives the stage to the people of West Monroe, Louisiana. Their lives are not caught unaware but willingly lived on camera. Some scenes are set up and re-enacted for the purposes of the narrative, but as the camera lingers on, the lives of the protagonists unfold unscripted. The working relationship between the filmmaker and the protagonists relocates the documentary’s drive from representing the community as authentically as possible to a more dialogical mode of storytelling, where the protagonists are equally the film’s makers.3

Because of the long unfolding takes, there is a prevailing sense of each scene being a key scene—somehow encapsulating a complex dynamic and emotional landscape in a few sentences or gestures. This, I contend, is the actualizing work of the documentary frame. The persistent takes realized by the director of photography Diego Romero Suarez-Llanos frame the protagonists in a manner that draws out sentiments that might otherwise go unexpressed. These emotional landscapes are the efficient presences that hold the communities together.

One such sentiment is anger. As the camera frames the protagonists in lingering, intimate shots, it creates the conditions in which expressions of anger might actualize. This “aesthetics of the frame” (Hongisto 2015, 12–18) is in operation for example in a scene where a group of intoxicated adults gets into a heated debate about politics in a worn-down backyard. What begins as an exchange of off-heard arguments about the government not caring evolves into a complex speech act where appraisals of Hillary Clinton are captured simultaneously with the failure of democracy in Suarez-Llanos’s long takes.

In a comparable scene, the film observes a paramilitary group that prepares for the prospect of UN declared martial law in the marshes of Louisiana. Their drills first come off as childish exercises of discontent, but as the scene progresses and the camera lingers, the rage of the group begins to grow and becomes more pronounced. The section ends with a lengthy passage where a car gets completely mauled in the middle of a field. The time and dedication put into destroying the car are linked to the depth and extent of their rage toward president Obama.

Hence, the work of the frame in The Other Side is especially noteworthy because it surpasses the level of letting “the other” voice their concerns. Instead, the observational documentary lingers on and participates in the lives of the people of West Monroe and in so doing, it capture a particular experience, a side of the social fabric of the community. Anger is a shared sentiment, a fixture of everyday life in West Monroe. In analyzing its nature.

Given the film’s focus on the lives of the people rather than on an event, in which the presence of a former president is an undeniable, the film’s frame does not represent the ex-president in a specific way.

Conclusion

Through these long takes, the film captures the lives of the community involving the everyday experiences, the emotional landscapes of the people and the observable presence of anger. The film’s frame does not represent the ex-president in what ways, if any, it should be understood.

Rather, the film is focused on the lives of the people of West Monroe, revealing the real experiences and emotions that exist in the community. These emotions, particularly anger, are captured and emphasized through the long takes, allowing the audience to witness the communal experience in a nuanced and profound manner.

This, I argue, is the way in which documentary frames can be considered to hold the communities together.

Notes

1 “Power will transform the world,” Plato said in The Statesman. But what about the lives of the people who live in the states of Plato’s Republic? How do they experience power and what is the nature of their lives?
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captures and expresses the complexity of the fraught emotional landscape and the desolate socio-political situation. In a manner loosely comparable to the documentaries discussed above, the lingering camera of The Other Side pushes anger to take form in its complex actuality. Anger is offered to the viewer as the compound that holds the depicted communities together, and it is up to the viewer to listen, think and analyze its scope and impact.

Given the recent turns in US politics, it is legitimate to claim that the film's offering went unnoticed in establishment politics. The way in which the documentary captures and expresses the work of efficient presences in the American South is the kind of storytelling that could inaugurate the beginnings of new social formations. Instead, in the recent presidential elections, the "hallucinatory fictions" and "phantasmic representations" were successfully deployed for business and profit.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have argued that the ethics of fabulation is contingent on what is created in the observational event. Whether this involves re-activating an ancient tradition (Perrault), impersonating celebrities (Rouch), performing Broadway numbers (Clarke), or capturing and expressing anger (Minervini), what is created is dependent on the presence of the documentary camera. However, this dependence should not be understood as a sign of inauthenticity.

Rather, the examples discussed in this chapter witness a transposition in the work of documentary cinema from producing authentic representations of real events to creating events in which the real actualizes. Here, the ethics of storytelling can no longer be considered in terms of the representational quality of the film in question; instead, it aligns with the creative moment of filming. Following Deleuze's notion of story-telling, the mutually inclusive observational event in the documentary is not satisfied with what is directly observable through the lens of the camera. It looks beyond, to the side and above to extract efficient presences with which the dominant modes of speaking, thinking, feeling and doing can be challenged.

This, I believe, is particularly important politically. As observational documentaries engage with realities in the making, they ask us to consider the conditions in which particular actions and sentiments take form. They are not content with expressing a different viewpoint, but call into question the circumstances in which reality actualizes.

Notes

1 "Powers of the false" link Deleuze's account to Nietzsche's postulation of will to power. In the section "How the 'true world' ultimately became a fable" of The Twilight of the Idols, Nietzsche (2007, 22–23) moves from the Platonic disposition of the true world being present to the pious and the virtuous to a disposition in which the idea of the true world becomes
fable-like. Both Nietzsche and Deleuze's projects dispose presumed ideas of truth for the creative force of time. Whereas Deleuze speaks of time as a stretch of becoming that is no longer subjugated to movement, Nietzsche argues for time and free will—a will to power that is no longer subjugated to a model of truth. Time as becoming, continuous change, challenges the ontological discernibility of the true and the false, and puts the emphasis on becoming as potentialization. This is the ontological premise of Deleuze's notion of fabulation (see also Bogue 2010, 31).

2. See, for example, Minervini (2015), Père (2015), and Rapold (2016).

3. Elsewhere, I have conceptualized this dialogical mode of storytelling in terms of “intercessors” and “facilitating” (see Hongisto 2015, 78–82; Hongisto and Pape 2015, 7–11).

References


Films

The Other Side (Louisiana) Dir Roberto Minervini. Perf’s Mark Kelley, Lisa Allen, James Lee Miller. Film Movement, France/Italy/USA 2015.

Stop the Pounding Heart Dir Roberto Minervini. Perf’s Sara Carlson, Colby Trichell, Tim Carlson. Big World Pictures, USA 2014.
