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Docu-fiction

Convergence and contamination between documentary
representation and fictional simulation

di

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Introduction

It is undeniable that nonfiction films wield significant power in Western culture. Thanks to their *bardic function*¹ they negotiate cultural values and meaning, disseminate information (and misinformation), prompt social change, engender significant cultural debate, represent events which pertain to everybody (letting them be accessible to all), and, in this way, they contribute to explicit and reinforce a common cultural heritage.

As an instrument of reproductive technology, the cinema was endowed with the power to preserve and *re-present* the world in real time. Traditionally the word “documentary” has suggested fullness and completion, knowledge and fact, explanations of the social world and its motivating mechanisms. The avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter noticed that “the (apparent) incorruptibility of optics guaranteed absolute truth”². Yet, as Richter’s parenthetical attribute of cinema’s veridical status indicates, few have ever trusted the cinema without reservation. But if ever they did, it was the documentary that most inspired that trust. Though more recently documentary has come to suggest incompleteness and uncertainty, recollection and impression, images of personal worlds and their subjective construction.

As the documentary enters its second century it finds itself less constrained by the ideological and aesthetic dogmas which have in turn driven and hindered its development. At their best, today’s documentarists pick and choose from the forms of the past (poetic, essayistic, investigative,

¹ Casetti e di Chio (1998), p 265.

² Phrase quoted in Renov (1995), <http://www.informatics.tuad.ac.jp/net-expo/ff/box/box7/en/b7-1.html> .

explorational, etc.) and produce films which are more varied, imaginative and challenging than anything we have seen before.

Although the dividing line between “documentary” and “fiction” has never been sharp, a particular trend has dominated recent innovations: to take to the limit the challenge of blurring the boundaries between “documentary” and “fiction” – witness the works of Peter Watkins, Errol Morris, Robert Kramer, etc. For filmmakers like them, as Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins state, “*Documentary* [...] is more a statement of attitude than content”³. Documentary film can express itself in a classic documentative language, but at the same time it can assume every interpreter’s or author’s voice, offering the more unconstrained visual composition possibilities to every poetic intention. That means that integral to this movement is a sense that the image itself no longer seems to play such a fixed role in our lives; more and more, screens and images are places where we access aspects of the real world, but also escape or ignore it.

A superficial remark could state that a documentary film does not bear the sign of an author, since it has been described so often as bare of any kind of personal intervention. Erroneously, documentaries are often perceived as a soulless work, to the detriment of the great fiction films, and aiming only at conveying information in an objective way. Nevertheless, the work of an author is primarily a creative treatment, no matter the genre which it exploits.

The paramount manifestation of this attitude will be the subject of my memoir: the docu-fiction film. A complex and unloved type of cinema and television product which has originated a huge debate – as intense as much as confused – about the controversial “blurring the boundaries” between facts and fiction. The practical and theoretical traversing of the border between fact and fiction is of paramount importance culturally. The hybrid form, although perhaps of minor interest in terms of audience’s rates, has constantly embodied the shifting nature of the fiction-nonfiction border. This

³ Macdonald and Cousins (1996), p. 311.

hybridisation process – which is important to outline, is not a novelty of the last decades, in fact, it is as old as cinema itself – originated two major and distinct forms of genre blending: the *documentary drama* and the *dramatised documentary*. It is not simply the appellations documentary drama or dramatised documentary that are at issue, but a documentary mode that has considerable cultural importance in the twentieth century. Documentary historic claim to be a truth-teller in its representation of the real can sometimes provoke a difficult situation whenever there is a suspicion that some kind of lie has been told. Exemplary is the case of the German director Michael Born, who was recently committed to prison for four years for having passed off fiction as fact⁴.

The two forms of docu-fiction are problematical because they openly proclaim both a documentary and dramatic provenance. Mixing drama and documentary is often seen as a fake and spurious exercise. There can be outlined three major problems:

1. The nature and status of the factual material used in the programme.
2. The kinds of dramatic representation employed by the programme.
3. The concern that the “dramatic licence”, taken by programme makers, might mean that liberties are taken and gross simplifications made.

Notice that the threshold between fact (i.e. nonfiction) and fiction is both abundantly clear and impossibly confused. As Derek Paget observes: “Rather like a rainbow, it is perceptible enough on one level; it is possible to agree that it is ‘there’ and even to describe it in some detail, but as one attempts to approach it practically, it recedes and teases thought”⁵. My dissertation will approach the subject with the consciousness that no absolute and categorical distinction between fiction and nonfiction can be drawn. Particularly for the docu-fiction issue it is not possible to talk in terms of “black” and “white”, but only of a complex set of “grey” tone variation.

⁴ For further information see Fried (16.09.1996), http://www.berlinonline.de/wissen/berliner_zeitung/archiv/1996/0916/kultur/0039/index.html and <http://rhein-zeitung.de/old/96/09/26/topnews/born.html> .

⁵ Paget (1998), p. 2.

This memoir will take on a study of this hybrid filmmaking form, probing the main functions played by fiction into documentary and by documentary into fiction. Trying to find an answer to questions like: What kind of a genre is it? What are its problems and possibilities? How does it relate on the one hand to straight documentary and on the other hand to fiction? Is there some kind of “senior partner”, the “docu-” element or the “-fiction”? If it has a serious function, what is it, and how should it best be carried out? What level of authenticity is being offered, and how sceptical should the audience be about claims of accuracy? And why is the genre so heavily criticised?

I wish to point out that this study shall not have any pretence of complete treatment of the subject and I am conscious that the enormous complexity that this topic implies – in particular in relation to issues such as *reality*, *truth*, *objectivity*, *manipulation* and the *viewer’s experience* – necessitates further consideration. Likewise I won’t treat directly the problems presented by propaganda films since I did not study the State archives. Consequently, I will neither analyse the production and economical aspects at the base of institutional made-to-order films, and all the propaganda-like risks (potentially) deriving by the filmmaker’s “obligation” to please the institutional mandataries.

The docu-fiction issue is only a single feature of the whole debate around film and television representations of the real. Furthermore, this topic was rarely addressed in a direct way, and never to an exhaustive degree. The subject is more usually approached in books by way of accounts in which docu-fiction appears as a relatively minor element. Notice that the term “docu-fiction” is never used by the English-speaking scholars, but only by the French-speaking and European ones. The lack of a common terminological background is probably caused by the absence of an extensive cross-cultural discussion and circulation of the ideas between the scholars. For that reason, when scholars talk about “boundaries blending”, “hybridisation”, “docu-fiction”, etc., some have in mind both the documentary drama and the dramatised documentary (British), others consider only the documentary drama (Americans) and some others only the dramatised documentary

(Canadians). I will adopt the British attitude toward the blending of the boundaries. Hence, with “docu-fiction” I will intend in the broadest sense both the documentary drama and the dramatised documentary.

To begin with, therefore, in the first section I will expose and apply the basic notions necessary for a structural comprehension of what unconstrained used terms like “fiction” and “nonfiction” really imply. This is actually an indispensable precondition to understand the arising of the complexity of the *meta-genre* docu-fiction. In this sense, the first section will discuss the historical and etymological origins of the two terms “fiction” and “documentary”. Essential in order to achieve the terminological consciousness necessary to understand why and how the distinction between the two macrogenres fiction and nonfiction has always been so difficult and discussed.

In the second part I will recall the first significative manifestations of this hybridisation, and that going back to the early period of the motion picture, at the beginning of the century. As mentioned previously, the docu-fiction is not a contemporary phenomenon. Its origins are clearly identifiable with the 7th art dawning. Although its first manifestations were the result of formal experiments put in action by their authors, it was only at the beginning of the sixties that this tendency would see its repertoire grow larger, from *direct cinema*⁶ to the typical Hollywood war film. In fact, fiction filmmakers have regularly drawn from the documentary “vocabulary” to improve the dramatic effect of their films, and vice versa. In this second section I will therefore discuss the main features, potentialities and difficulties implied in the boundaries’ blurring put in action by the practice of the dramatised documentary and the documentary drama.

⁶ Developed by Albert Maysles for the purpose of giving the impression of recording films in a direct, immediate and authentic manner. This genre utilises schedules, prompted narratives and staged events even if the impression given is that the phenomenon are recorded exactly as they happen.

SECTION I

Fiction – Nonfiction film: notes for a pragmatic distinction

There can hardly be a more important question about a film than this: *Is it fiction or nonfiction?* If the question does not appear to be especially important, that's because we rarely need to ask it. Most often we know, in advance of seeing it, that the film before us belongs to the one or to the other. But imagine we did not know whether James Cameron's *Titanic* (1999) is a magnificent fantasy or a truthful report. We would not know whether, or in what proportions, to be delighted or instructed by it. No coherent reading of it would be possible.

It is important to emphasise that categorisation is “fundamental to thought, perception, action, and speech”⁷. When the spectator sees something as a kind of thing, he is categorising, and categories enable *reasoning*. For that reason, with an unclear understanding of the categories we use, we risk confusion of thought, and that would lead to a derangement of communication and understanding.

So, what makes a film fictional or nonfictional? Despite the apparent ease with which we judge that this is fictional and that is not, and despite the significance that judgements of this kind have for our subsequent experience of the film, most of us are not in a good position to answer the question. Fiction and nonfiction are one of those concepts like *goodness*, *colour*, *number* and *cause* that we have little difficulty in applying but great difficulty in explaining.

⁷ Plantinga (1997), p. 8.

For this purpose, and in order to settle the semantic cluster limits, it might be useful to trace a brief history of the terms in question.

As explained above, one of the most important aspects implied in the study of the moving image concerns the question if a film has to be considered as belonging to the fictional or nonfictional realm, and why to the one rather than to the other. Notice that the raising of these questions belongs to the effects that the author of the film wants to elicit in the audience, exactly as the assumptions he wants the audience to make about the relation between the movie and the extra-cinematic reality.

In order to settle the docu-fiction question the first step will consist in drawing a clear distinction between the concepts of fiction and non-fiction. This first section will outline what is commonly intended as fiction and documentary film, and try to define, with the help of Noël Carroll's intention-response model of communication, what stands at the base of the two macrogenres differentiation. Which means what are the features that distinguish the two kinds of films, upholding a perspective based on the author's deliberate intention to create a fictional or nonfictional work.

1. Commentaries on the etymological history of “documentary” and “fiction”

1.1 “Documentary”

For our purposes it assumes particular interest the origin of terms like “document” and “documentary”. As indicated by Philip Rosen, notions of document and documentary have a genealogy that could be sketched with

reference to the concept of historicity⁸. According to the 1933 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the noun “document” – which comes from the Latin *docere*, to teach – entered the English language by the mid-fifteenth century with two chief derivations from its Latin and Old French roots, now obsolete. One of these interrelated semantic groups has to do with teaching and/or warning, and the other with evidence or proof. A seemingly subsidiary association arose in the eighteenth century, when the term document developed an association with the written “evidence”, such as manuscripts and deeds, but could also include such artefacts as tombstones and coins as well as official legal and commercial artefacts such as bills of lading, insurance policies and so on. As for the noun “documentary” it seems to have entered the language only in the nineteenth century, when “documentation” was also increasingly common. The OED indicates that “documentary” was first used as an adjective directly indicating reference to documentation, giving examples such as “They were in possession of documentary evidence which would confound the guilty” (Macqualey, 1855). The “document” and the process of “documenting” constituted a means of “objectifying” evidence that could then be produced and accepted as proof in courts of law. But it is significant however that this usage now included historiographic extensions such as “Going back beyond annalists to original and documentary authorities” (Pattison, 1861).

The use of “documentary” as a noun came later and was associated with the new arts and technologies of the early twentieth century: the camera-based media of still photography and film. These claims resided partly in the belief that those modes of representation were inherently superior to those of other, older media. The 1933 OED does not mention film at all. However, Griersonianism is fully registered in the 1994 revised edition, which adds a new definition: “Factual, realistic; applied esp. to a film or literary work, etc., based on real events or circumstances, and intended primarily for instruction or record purposes”. This is followed by a dozen sample uses, the earliest of

⁸ Rosen (1993), p. 65.

which is from John Grierson's 1926 review of Robert Flaherty's *Moana* when he wrote that the film had a "documentary value"⁹, and six of which are from the 1930s. In this way Grierson moved the term from his initial use of it back to the earlier one of teaching and propagating, using the "documents" of modern life as materials to spread the faith of social democracy. This usage expands beyond cinema in the last three examples, dating from 1957 to 1962. These extend the notion of documentary as an effect of factual reality to film construction, to a book, and finally to its supposed contrary, as in the seemingly oxymoronic phrase "documentary fiction".

The 1994 revised OED also adds the new subsidiary term "documentarist", meaning documentary filmmaker, as being in use by the 1950s. All in all, then, Grierson's phraseology appears to have become current almost as soon as he proposed it. This suggests a cultural conjuncture which requires some designation of the field he named, as Rosen states: "an arena of meaning centering on the authority of the real founded in the indexical trace, various forms of which were rapidly disseminated at all levels of industrial and now postindustrial culture"¹⁰. This cultural conjuncture is undoubtedly connected to the semantic development around concepts of document and documentary deriving from the nineteenth century and lasting into the twentieth, whereby the terms were extended from written evidence and historical artefacts to the factual film and then simply to factuality. This was an overall shift in semantic emphasis from education to authentication in an expansion from the written that characterised, and was characterised by, the filmic. One could consider that shift as a process of lexical adaptation in response to technological changes, or as a conceptual slide that provided some "historical" basis for a theoretically convenient analogy between writing and film. But it is also the case that such changes were situated in a socio-

⁹ Although, according to Carl Plantinga (1997: 26), the term *documentaire* was widely used in France in the 1920s before Grierson used its English translation to refer to *Moana*, and Edward S. Curtis used the terms "documentary material" and "documentary works" in relation to moving picture nonfictions as early as 1914.

¹⁰ Rosen (1993), p. 66.

cultural matrix conferring authority on intended conveyances of a real. For instance, the written legal document embodies a real of the intentionality of legal subjects, the original or historical document a real of dated authentication and cinema a real of perceivable concrete past existent in movement. Hence, in the evolution of the idea of document, the connection of authenticity and authority goes beyond the etymological relation. The authority of documenting was first drawn from the power implicit in its denotations, that is, warning, admonishing or teaching; it then became an evidentiary element in an argument or rhetoric; and currently, within a semantic history that seems linked to film, this authority can exceed even its modes of inscription, as a claim that achieves the authority of the real itself.

1.1.1 “Fact”

Tightly related to the “documentary” notion is the one of “fact”. Term whose origin goes back to the late-fifteenth-century meaning of “an action” or “a deed”, deriving from the Latin *facere*, to do (OED). It first picked up the inflection of “truth; reality” in the sixteenth century. The apparently inevitable antithesis with “fiction” began to develop in this period also, as did its connection to “document” and “evidence”. In the seventeenth century it began to mark the notion of the verifiable (“a datum of experience”), which again was useful in the emergent legal institution. This resonance facilitated the shift in the rationalist eighteenth century to the legalistic “basis for inference” and “interpretation”, which enabled courts of law to accept verbal and other evidence of occurrences in their deliberations. Much of this legalistic activity was of course designed to protect the individual in a newly industrialised society that was developing the concept of “private property”. As noticed by Paget, the quasi-religious level to which “fact” has risen is best epitomised by the 1926 dictum of the *Manchester Guardian’s* editor C.P.

Scott: “comment is free, facts are sacred”¹¹. Yet, in the twentieth century, suspicion tends to remain, encouraged by the post-industrial alienation of populations accustomed to mistrust. The main perplexities seem to be: *Who is offering these facts to us? How can we be sure we have been given all the facts? Are other facts being suppressed, and if so, by what agency? Can we trust the facts given, or are there others, equally credible, that will come to light later?* The more the photographic and electronic media have claimed the fact, paradoxically, the more people have tended to grow in doubt. The suspicion that facts are never what they seem has now strongly taken root in Western and other industrialised societies.

1.2 “Fiction”

According to the 1994 revised edition of the OED the noun “fiction” points back to its Latin source, the term *fictio*, “the action of shaping, a feigning, that which is feigned”. *Fictio* in turn derives from *fingere*, “to make by shaping, feign, make up or invent a story or excuse”. The third edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* indicates that the first time the term appeared in the English language has been traced in a work composed around 1412, in which it was used in the sense of “invention of the mind, that which is imaginatively invented”. The OED points to the first usage in this sense even further back, to 1398, with Trevisa who wrote “They wysely..vse poetes in their ficcions”. It is not a far step from this meaning to the sense of “the species of literature which is concerned with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters” (not necessarily based on facts), which has been first recorded in 1599 (Linche, *The Fountaine of Ancient Fiction*). The written output of narratives derived from the imagination solidified in later centuries around the composition and production of stories and novels. In particular by the nineteenth century the prose “novel” had

¹¹ Paget (1998), p. 104.

become the dominant cultural form with a reach well beyond a middle-class readership. Insofar as television has inherited a popular story-telling function from the nineteenth-century novel, its dramatic products have also become classifiable as “fictions” and are routinely described by the adjective “fictional”. By the early twentieth century also the category “nonfiction” had made its appearance. This back-formation depends upon the intrinsic contrast between fact and fiction. The degree of seriousness inherent in the fact, the document and the evidential informs the concept and category of “nonfiction”. So, the “documentary” film and television program exists historically within this category and this reasoning. The documentary, then, through its supposed access to the phenomenal world, holds the promise of a special kind of control of the external world. It is the control that comes from knowledge and information; herein lies the instructional and educational thrust of the documentary impulse. “Fiction” and “drama”, on the other hand, come to the audience separated from seriousness by a nineteenth-century cultural shift, which makes some wish to see them as peripheral activities associated with leisure and “non-serious” aspects of life. They may be fun, but they are lying.

1.2.1 “Drama”

The etymology of “drama” dates back to a late Latin word derived from the Greek word *dran*, to do (OED). This term entered the English language in the early sixteenth century by way of a French word, *drame*. In the Elizabethan and Jacobean period the institution of theatre – and the practice of “drama” therein – staked out its cultural importance as a representation of actions, and this has become established and accepted. The earliest recorded meanings of drama refer to “plays”, or dialogue compositions in verse and prose, that have “high emotional content”. We currently have notions of “drama” whose history goes back more than four hundred years, so that there are two quite distinct meanings to the word: “Drama”, which is the

practice of representation, and “drama”, the quality inherent in actions of all kinds, including those in the real world.

2. *What is commonly intended by fiction and documentary film?*

2.1 Fiction film “is” ...

The fictional genre film is commonly considered as a single category that includes all that is commonly held to be genre film (i.e. western, horror, musical, science-fiction, etc.) which share a common origin and basic form. Bound by a strict set of conventions, tacitly agreed upon by filmmaker and audience, the genre film provides the experience of an ordered world and is an essentially classical structure based upon a fixed plot, defined characters and a satisfyingly predictable ending.

The fiction film generally belongs to a defined genre category, in this way it presents a structure that embodies an idea of form and a strict adherence to form that is opposed to experimentation, novelty, or tampering with the given order of things.

It is important to point out that “genre film is a classical mode in which imitation not of life but of conventions is of paramount importance”¹²; just as the classical dramas of Greece, the stories are well known. Though there may be some charm in the particular arrangement of formula variables in the most current example of a genre, the audience seeks the solid and familiar referents of that genre, expecting and usually receiving a large measure of the known as opposed to the innovative. Ultimately, fiction films are pure

¹² Grant (1995), p. 113.

emotional articulation, fictional constructs of the imagination, growing essentially out of group interests and values.

2.2 Documentary film “is“...

Although it may be a relatively less theorised concept historically, it has generated a high level of definitional activity within our own period as a result of its identification with the camera in particular. There have been attempts at definition of the documentary film, which have been too broad in scope, defining the documentary in such a general way that it fails to distinguish films of one genre from those of other genres. Among the broad ones, can be found the British filmmaker and producer John Grierson, generally considered to be the first one who used the term *documentary* in a review of Robert Flaherty's film *Moana* (1925), indicating the ability of the medium to literally produce a visual “document” of a particular event. Grierson, though fiercely committed to the educational and democratic capabilities of the documentary, clearly recognised that film itself was a relative form and suggests that “cinema is neither an art nor an entertainment; it is a form of publication, and may publish in a hundred different ways for a hundred different audiences”¹³. The documentary form is one method of cinematic “publication” which in Grierson's terms is defined by “the creative treatment of actuality”¹⁴. Grierson's formulation stresses two functions:

1. *recording* of facts, events, life through images and sounds; and
2. *interpretation*, namely, take a point of view.

Some documentarists deny any interpretative element in their work, and claim to be “objective”. As noticed by Henry Breitrose, a truly “objective” documentary should be: “a 360 degree view, so that nothing however seemingly insignificant escapes the frame; a continuous and unedited take,

¹³ Hardy (1979), p. 85.

¹⁴ The phrase is quoted in Hardy (1979), p. 13.

so that nothing that occurred in front of the lens is omitted; an invisible camera and production team, because awareness of process might alter the behaviour of those being photographed”¹⁵. This attitude may be strategic, but it is surely meaningless, because the author makes endless choices: he selects topics, people, vistas, angles, lenses, juxtapositions, sounds and words. Each selection is an expression of his point of view, whether he is aware of it or not, whether he acknowledges it or not. The documentarist who claims for objectivity is merely asserting his conviction that his choices have a special validity and deserve everyone’s acceptance.

Grierson acknowledges that the filming of “actuality” in itself does not constitute what might be seen as the “truth”; he recognises that “actuality” footage must be subject to a creative process to reveal its truth, this apparent manipulation of material is both a recording of “reality” and a statement *about* “reality”. As Carl Plantinga points out, Grierson, in requiring creativity of the documentary, hoped to distinguish it from the tedious information film, and to recognise the need for dramatisation in representing social issues¹⁶. Thus for Grierson, not all nonfiction films are documentaries: they must first satisfy requirements of dramatisation and “creativity”. That the treatment in a documentary must be of actuality, rather than of the staged facsimile, is one of Grierson’s first principles: “We believe that the original (or native) actor, and the original (or native) scene, are better guides to the screen interpretation of the modern world [than actors and sets]”¹⁷. A very suggestive phrase, but which needs further development because it is too broad. As the Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray emphasises:

I have often wondered if this [Grierson’s definition] was not a little misleading; because the question that immediately arises from the definition is: What is reality? Surely it is not only what constitutes the tangible aspects of everyday existence. Subtle and complex human

¹⁵ Breitrose (2000), <http://ccc.cnart.mx/memorias/escenarios/memoi.htm> .

¹⁶ Plantinga (1997), p. 12.

¹⁷ Grierson (1934-36), p. 97.

relationships, which many of the best fiction films deal with, are also as much a part of reality as those other aspects generally probed by documentary makers. Even fables and myths and fairy tales have their roots in reality. Krishna, Ravana, Aladdin, Cinderella, Jack the Giant Killer – all have their prototypes in real life. Therefore, in a sense, fables and myths are also creative interpretation of reality. In fact, all artists in all branches of non-abstract art are engaged in the same pursuit that Grierson has assigned exclusively to the makers of documentary film.¹⁸

A similar problem of broadness is Richard Barsam's list of categories which constitute and define what he generically terms "the non-fiction film". This list aims at demonstrating the different types of films which have been perceived as documentary, and clearly share some of its possible codes and conventions. The categories include:

- factual film
- ethnographic film
 - films of exploration
 - propaganda film
 - cinéma-vérité
 - direct cinema
 - documentary

As Paul Wells points out, Barsam locates the documentary itself outside the other categories because he suggests that the role of the filmmaker is much more specific in determining the interpretation of the material in these types of film¹⁹. Namely, he views the documentary as a medium which, despite its use of "actuality" footage, is still what could be termed an "authored" form, and this arguably provides a useful distinction by which the other categories may be evaluated in regard to their common characteristics and divergent methods. But, basically, Griersonian problematics persist.

¹⁸ Ray (1969), p. 381.

¹⁹ Wells (1999), p. 213.

If some attempts to define the documentary film are too broad, other are too rigid, formal and restrictive, as in the case of Wells, for whom the documentary film can be defined as: “A non-fiction text using ‘actuality’ footage, which may include the live recording of events and relevant research material (i.e. interviews, statistics, etc.). This kind of text is usually informed by a particular point of view, and seeks to address a particular social issue which is related to and potentially affects the audience.”²⁰ Another restrictive view is the one expressed by Michael Weinberger, who sustains that a documentary must meet five major requirements:

(1) it must attempt to tell a true story in a non-dramatic fashion; **(2)** it must appear to do so by presenting only factual evidence; **(3)** it must not attempt to re-create the truth (though some would defend the validity of this method); **(4)** it must claim objectivity; **(5)** most importantly, (and perhaps most difficult to ascertain) it must, as closely as possible, present all factual evidence in its original context.²¹

Dramatic modes of representation are intrinsically part of cinematic language, re-enactments are without doubt valuable means to achieve otherwise unattainable ends and claiming straight objectivity is, due to its mere theoretical value, both trivial and meaningless. So why should documentary film take on such an inconsistent, unfeeling and soulless form?

A useful characterisation of nonfiction film (and so for fiction) must have strong explanatory power, but must simultaneously account for marginal and borderline examples of the genre. “It must recognize”, as Plantinga notes, “the historical, continuously evolving nature, not only of nonfiction practices, texts, and practitioner, but of the very notions of ‘nonfiction’ and ‘documentary’”²². In order to reach a satisfying definition of the fiction and nonfiction film it is first of all necessary to find a way to distinguish them.

²⁰ Wells (1999), p. 212.

²¹ Weinberger (1996), <http://www.voicenet.com/~weinb.hoc.html> .

²² Plantinga (1997), p. 15.

3. How can we distinguish them?

It is natural to think that we can discover whether the work before us is fiction (or not) simply by “reading” it. In that case, we might say, its being fictional (or not) is determined by the work’s verbal and visual structure: “reading” a film is, after all, a matter of “reading” the images and the sounds that constitute it. If we find out whether the film is fictional (or not) by “reading” it, that must be because there is some quality of its *words* and *visual sentences* that makes it fiction (or not).

3.1 Two arguments against a fiction-nonfiction distinction

According to Carl Plantinga, those who deny a distinction between fiction and nonfiction (as Jean-Louis Comolli) think of nonfiction film, by definition, “as somehow ‘unmanipulated’”²³, and seemingly define nonfiction films as the “transparent”, rather than “creative” treatment of actuality. For them, although manipulation is associated with the fiction film, in nonfiction reality is represented transparently, as a pristine and untouched representation of the real. In this way, when a filmed event of fact is manipulated, it loses its natural purity and takes on an aura of fiction. Several filmmakers have similarly equated manipulation of nonfiction material with fiction. The direct cinema filmmaker Frederick Wiseman, for example, sees editing as a fictionalisation of his materials. Wiseman observes that “one of the things we are doing is creating the illusion that we are telling the truth. [...] The whole exercise is manipulation”²⁴.

These arguments function as an important countermeasure to the claim that nonfiction offers a pure and unmediated truth. Yet their mistake, according to

²³ Plantinga (1997), p. 10.

²⁴ From an interview by Eugene Hernandez, published on *Indiewire.com* in 1999 (no date).

Plantinga, is to equate the manipulation of materials with fiction, as if only a film without any manipulation of the original photographic document could qualify as nonfiction: “The distinction between fiction and nonfiction should not be based on a presumed correspondence to reality (nonfiction) versus mediated representation (fiction), but according to the stance taken toward the projected world of the text and the text’s indexing”²⁵.

By defining fiction in such a broad way that it is difficult to imagine any discourse that is nonfiction, and by proposing impossible requirements for nonfiction, this type of argument becomes quite questionable. Thus, if we consider anything that manipulates its materials as fiction, all films should be considered as fiction films. How could any film present reality transparently, or offer reality itself rather than a representation of reality? If that is our requirement for nonfiction films, then we must admit that *none* exist. Should we accept their arguments, we would still need specific mechanisms in order to differentiate films such as *Star Wars* (1977) and *Einstein’s Brain* (1994). Fictions and nonfictions like these perform distinct social functions, and are viewed by spectators with reference to a different set of expectations. The point is that if both manipulate their filmic materials (and they do so) through structure, style, etc. then we must look for the distinction between fiction and nonfiction films elsewhere than in filmic manipulation.

The second common argument against the distinction is the one condensed in Michael Renov’s *Theorizing Documentary*, in which he sustains that “In every case, elements of style, structure, and expository strategy draw upon preexistent constructs, or schemas, to establish meanings and effects for audiences. What I am arguing is that documentary shares the status of all discursive forms with regard to its tropic or figurative character and that it employs many of the methods and devices of its fictional counterpart”²⁶. And that “[...] all discursive forms – documentary included – are, if not fictional, at

²⁵ Plantinga (1997), p. 33. For more information on the “indexing” issue see chapter 5.

²⁶ Renov (1993), p. 3.

least *fictive*, this by virtue of their tropic character²⁷. As Hayden White has so brilliantly described, ‘every mimesis²⁸ can be shown to be distorted and can serve, therefore, as an occasion for yet another description of the same phenomenon.’ This is because ‘all discourse *constitutes* the objects which it pretend only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively²⁹. One reason introduced by Renov in order to call into the question the distinction between nonfiction films and fiction films is that the two typologies share many of the same structures: flashbacks, parallel editing, crosscutting, point-of-view editing, etc.³⁰. Consider the analogous case of literature: there are no textual features – linguistic structures, writing styles, plots, etc. – that strictly identify a text as a fictional one or not. It is possible to suppose that some structures can be found only in fiction, such as internal monologues, but in fact such structures can be found also in nonfictional works. In any case that is an insurmountable problem, since any linguistic structure, plot or any other textual component which characterises the fictional text can be imitated even by the nonfiction author in order to obtain a wider range of aesthetic effects. The same problem of course can be found on the opposite side, the one of the fiction author, who can reproduce any peculiar characteristic of the nonfiction text in order to increase the possibilities at his disposal, included the one to impregnate his fictional work with a major sense of realism or authenticity. Consequently, since both fiction and nonfiction authors can appropriate any of the formulas and devices associated with the two macrogenres, it is possible to assert that these cannot be differentiated on the basis of some linguistic or textual features belonging (even only in a potential way) to both of them. In other words, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction “is a distinction between the commitments of the texts, not

²⁷ Intended as their recourse to the figurative use of a word or an expression.

²⁸ Purported in the Aristotelian sense, namely as the imitation or representation of aspects of the sensible world (especially human actions).

²⁹ Renov (1993), p. 7.

³⁰ Carroll (1999), p. 176.

between the surface of the texts”³¹. Therefore, Renov’s attempt to deconstruct the distinction between nonfiction and fiction on the basis of shared technique misses the point altogether.

It is true that facts about style, narrative form, and plot structure *may* count as evidence that what is seen is fiction (or not), but these are not the things that make it so. It is possible for two films to be alike in formal structures, yet for one to be fiction and the other one not. There simply is no formal feature necessarily shared by all fictional films and necessarily absent from all nonfictional films. Moreover, as Trevor Ponech notes:

[...] a wholly non-fictional motion picture need not be wholly factual. It need not contain a single purely objective, unmanipulated representation or statement. It need not be on any particular kind of subject-matter; nor need that which it depicts really exist, more or less as depicted, ‘out there’ in off-screen reality. Nor is documentary [...] defined by the particular conventions of norms – pertaining to form, style, content, truth or objectivity – according to which it is produced, classified, and/or interpreted. [...] A cinematic work is non-fiction if and only if its maker so intends it.³²

The best way to carry out the differentiation between fiction and nonfiction is to rely on Noël Carroll’s intention-response model of communication. A model which, using its creator’s words, “applied to art, presupposes that an artist or an author, such as a filmmaker, communicates to an audience by way of indicating that the audience is intended to respond to his or her text [...] in a certain way, where the reason that the audience has for mobilizing the response or the stance in question is the audience’s recognition of the sender’s intention that they do so”³³. We can notice that it is a social approach, in the sense that it depends upon certain relations, firmly

³¹ Carroll (1996), p. 287.

³² Ponech (1999), p. 8.

³³ Carroll (1999), p. 181.

established in our communicative practices, between the sender and the receiver of a text.

3.2 Intentionality as fiction/nonfiction *differentiae*

Having stated that the text's fictionality or factuality cannot be determined by its manifest textual properties, the differentiation of the two macrogenres must be founded on their *non-manifest*³⁴ textual properties. In other words since it is not possible to tell whether a text is fictional in virtue of its manifest properties, inspected in isolation, it is necessary to consider the text in relation to something else, something that is not manifest in the text, which cannot be read off its surface.

The distinction between fiction and nonfiction can be drawn on the basis of specific authorial intentions. Intentions which may not be manifested in the work, but which are defined in relation to the author and to the spectator. In order to clearly bring up a differentiation model between the two macrogenres founded on the author's intentionality it is necessary first of all to introduce the concept of *make-believe*.

3.2.1 *A preliminary notion: the make-believe concept*

As sustained by Gregory Currie in his *The Nature of Fiction*³⁵ what distinguishes a fictive utterance from a nonfictive one is the speaker's deliberate intention that the audience will respond in different ways in these different cases. In the case of fiction the author wants, presumably, the audience to see and to be entertained by staged actions and events. What the author of fiction film does intend is that the viewer takes a certain attitude

³⁴ Carroll (1999), p. 179.

³⁵ Currie (1990), p. 18.

toward the propositions uttered in the course of his performance. This is the attitude often described in terms of *make-believe* (or suspension of disbelief): “an author [...] communicates to an audience by way of indicating that the audience is intended to respond to his or her text [...] in a certain way, where the reason that the audience has for mobilising the response or the stance in question is the audience’s recognition of the sender’s intention that they do so”³⁶. In other words, the viewer is intended by the author to *make-believe* that the story as uttered is *true*; namely the author pretends the audience to believe what is shown on the screen. In this way *make-believe* allows the person to achieve in imagination what he is denied in reality, that he gains vicarious experience through *make-believe*, that disaster occurs if he confuses what he *make-believes* with what he believes. He acknowledges, in other words, a body of complex connections between belief, desire, experience, sensation, and *make-believe*.

In the fiction-making activity people enjoy daydreaming and construct various scenarios that they run through when they desire to turn aside from the outer world. As in other things, some are more skilful at this than others; the less talented turn to those with greater talents to construct the material for these fantasies: fiction is born. And fictions do not differ essentially from daydreams in their capacity for realism, complexity, formal structure and cognitive significance. It is then possible to consider the *make-believe* as an attitude that the person takes to propositions: one can believe that *P*, desire that *P*, and *make-believe* that *P*.

Like belief and desire, *make-believe* earns its place in the common-sense psychology by its ability to explain, it is a kind of state that can be accompanied by or give rise to introspective feelings and images. *Make-believe* is considered to be closely connected to imagination, and one quite ordinary sense of imagination is that which creates mental images. Certainly, man’s fantasies are strongly marked by the presence of visual and bodily sensation, but a fantasy or a daydream, however vivid, is primarily to be

³⁶ Carroll (1999), p. 181.

characterised in terms of the events, happenings, states of affairs, or whatever, that the images make vivid to us. When the spectator sees a fictional film and becomes absorbed by it he may find compelling images before his mind, but a documentary or whatever nonfictional product can stimulate the imagination in the same way. What distinguishes the consume of fiction from the consume of nonfiction is not the activity of the imagination but the attitude the viewer adopts toward the content³⁷ of what he sees on the screen: *make-belief* in the one case, *belief* in the other.

3.2.2 *Author's fictive intention and audience's fictive stance*

The idea of an author *intending* that the audience make-believes his story is central to the explanation of what fiction and nonfiction films are. The author's intention that the audience takes the attitude of make-believe to his story is part of what can be called *author's fictive intention*. To put in another way, it is "the intention of the author, filmmaker, or sender of a structure of sense-bearing signs [i.e. text] that the audience imagine the content of the story in question on the basis of their recognition that this is what the sender intends them to do"³⁸.

Suppose we want to buy a coffee from a vending machine. After we put money in the machine, we then press one of the selection buttons. Why do

³⁷ By "content" or "propositional content" it is meant the extra-cinematic objects, individuals, states of affairs, situations, and events indicated and described in the movie depiction. Notice that a film's content is not always fully manifested in what is explicitly shown on the screen. Often spectators must detect implicit content by making inferences, including reasoning about authorial plans and preferences. Specimen is Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), in which the author wants the audience to grasp something concerning the effect of prejudices that can easily undermine the pursuit of justice and truth. At no time is this statement directly communicated on the screen or uttered by a speaker, the audience infers from the movie's other properties that the director would have viewers form this belief.

³⁸ Carroll (1999), p. 181.

we do this? Because we realise that this is what the designer of the machine intends us to do, presupposing that we wish to use the machine in the way it was designed to be used. In a similar way there is a design intention when it comes to fiction, namely, according to Currie, that we *make-believe* the content of the story. Moreover, the audience adopts this attitude when consuming a fiction because it recognises that this is what the author intends him to do, presupposing that the audience wishes to use the story in the way in which it was designed to be used. So, when the spectator sees on the screen Greta Garbo in the role of Anna Karenina in the homonymous film directed by Clarence Brown in 1935, he make-believes that she *is* Anna Karenina. Moreover, his mental state here is one of imagining, rather than one of believing, because he recognises that the director intends him to imagine rather than to believe that Greta Garbo *is* Anna Karenina.

The notion of fictive intention looks at the matter from the author's side of the transaction; the notion of the *fictive stance* refers to the audience's part of the negotiation. This fictive stance is a particular attitude which the author wants the audience to adopt toward the propositional content of the story (Carroll, 1999). So, where the work is a fiction, the attitude or stance is one of make-believing the propositional content of a text whether it is of the nature of words, images, or something else.

3.2.3 *Author's assertoric intention and audience's assertoric stance*

In contrast to the case of fiction, the author of a nonfiction film possesses an assertoric intention³⁹ which prescribes that the spectator adopts an assertoric stance toward the content of the film on the basis of his recognition that this is what the sender intends him to do.

³⁹ Notice that with "assertion" are not meant only linguistic declarations, but also assertions performed with pictures and sounds.

Recognising the filmmaker's particular assertoric intention, the audience entertains the content of the film as asserted thought. This means that the audience regards the content of the film as something that the author believes to be true or at least plausible; in other words, that the states of affairs represented are asserted to occur in the actual world as portrayed. Therefore, in producing nonfiction the author uses segments of motion picture footage in order to assert that something is, was, will be or could be the case. According to Ponech, "to perform a cinematic assertion is to employ a motion picture medium, typically consisting of both visual and audio tracks, with the expressed intention that the viewer form or continue to hold the attitude of belief toward certain states of affairs, objects, situations, events, propositions, and so forth, where the relevant states of affairs etc. need not actually exist"⁴⁰. The nonfiction film can involve re-enactment, animation, the use of stock footage, etc. In fact, a nonfiction film could be composed completely with animation or computer-generated imagery. Since the notion of nonfiction film merely requires that the text be presented with the assertoric authorial intention that the audience entertains the content of the film as asserted thought. Hence, documentaries acquire their status because they are conceived, created, shown and enjoyed with certain definitive communicative purposes in mind.

In *Einstein's Brain* the director Kevin Hulls intends spectators to take the attitude of belief toward his representation's content. All the extra-cinematic objects, individuals, situations, etc. depicted in the film need not be actual or real, just as one can make verbal assertions on how a nuclear holocaust would be, one can produce filmic assertions about it, even going so far as to use special effects to show how it allegedly looks like⁴¹. What is important is that in directing the spectator's attention toward an audio-visual realm the filmmaker takes steps to produce in the viewer certain determinate perceptions regarding what contents are depicted.

⁴⁰ Ponech (1999), p. 204.

⁴¹ For a plain example see Peter Watkin's *The War Game* (1965).

3.2.4 For a concrete definition

After having exposed the founding concepts defining fiction and nonfiction, it is now possible to present a complete formula identifying the fiction film:

a text t produced by sender s is fictional only if s presents t to an audience a with the intention that a make-believes the propositional content of t for the reason that a recognises this as s ' intention.

Moreover, once the crucial defining condition of fiction is outlined, the formula for nonfiction can also be generated by negating the core-defining feature of fiction, so:

a text t is nonfictional only if sender s presents it to audience a with the intention that a not make-believes t as a result of a 's grasp of s ' intention.

In other words, the non-fictive stance involves not make-believing the propositional content of the film, since the fictive stance involves entertaining as unasserted the content of the film; namely a nonfiction film is one presented by an author to an audience with the intention that this audience recognises that it (the audience) is intended to consider the content of the film as an asserted thought.

In asserting that something or other is the case, the filmmaker expects the audience to achieve particular knowledge regarding not only what is shown on the screen but also how things stand in the world. By choosing to document the adventure of a Japanese Mathematics Professor (Kenji Sugimoto) who wants to find Einstein's brain in order to make new studies on it, by selectively shooting the events in which Professor Sugimoto occurs, by choosing some of this footage, by editing these shots into a sequence, and by taking steps to distribute this work, one of the effects intended by director

Hull is to get whoever views the film to notice, for instance, that after countless difficulties he succeeded in finding the mysteriously lost brain and to obtain a little section of it. This is a nonfictional work because its maker openly signals his intention that viewers take the attitude of belief toward this situation.

However, it is necessary to stress that there are no logical assurances that every cognition arising from nonfictional viewing will always be perfectly accurate. Owing to misperception or inattentiveness one could come away with numerous faulty and imperfect beliefs about what the filmmaker wished to show; but such spectator errors could be originated also because of the unclear or imprecise nature of the representation itself. Likewise, due to their own cognitive limitation, the depiction's ambiguity, or the filmmaker's errors or even malfeasance, spectators might form mistaken or unclear ideas about the extra-cinematic world⁴².

4. Possible objections

The concept of nonfiction film requires that the audience recognises the specific intention of the filmmaker. However, followers of the concept of *intentional fallacy*⁴³, like Monroe Beardsley, would argue that it is not possible to have access to authorial intentions⁴⁴, and, therefore, this theory would not be practicable. Such an objection presupposes that intentions are always unintelligible, but we constantly attribute intentions to others with an impressively high degree of success. For instance, when somebody holds a

⁴² Exemplary are all the propaganda films.

⁴³ According to the OED: "in literary criticism, the fallacy that the meaning or value of a work may be judged or defined in terms of the writer's intention".

⁴⁴ Fischer (1983), pp. 86-96.

door open, we take this as a signal of his intention that we walk through it, and most of the time when we make this inference, we are not mistaken; when the notice comes from the phone service provider, we always recognise that they intend us to pay our bill, and every time we pay our bill in response, it turns out that we were right.

Social life could not flourish if we are not able to discern the intentions of others. We could not understand the behaviour or the words and actions of others if we could not successfully attribute intentions to them. This does not mean that we are infallible in intentions' attributions, but we are undoubtedly more successful in this matter than we are unsuccessful: "the social fabric could not cohere, unless we were generally successful in attributing intentions to others"⁴⁵. Consequently, there is no ground for thinking that, in principle, others' intentions are unintelligible, for in fact, they are not.

Moreover, our ability to attribute intentions to others successfully is not restricted to living people: historians study the words and deeds of the dead with a view to determine their intentions. And there is no reason to suppose that they are not often doing so successfully: are historians wrong when they hypothesise that by early 1941 Hitler intended to invade the Soviet Union, or that in 1959 Kennedy intended to run for the presidency? Undoubtedly Hitler and Kennedy took many of their intentions to the grave with them, but some of their intentions are certainly accessible to historians. Not all the historical actors' intentions (including filmmakers) are systematically obscure, because historians (including film historians) stand against no impenetrable barriers when they come to suppose the intentions of past persons.

Therefore, we can say that the intentional fallacy argument is inconclusive, fundamentally because it is an argument which pertains to the interpretation and evaluation of the meaning of text, and not to their categorisation. It is out of the question that the *meaning* intentions of the author may be out of sight, but there are also some *categorical* intentions, intentions about the category to which the film belongs: anyone can doubt that Stanley Kubrick intended

⁴⁵ Carroll (1999), p. 192.

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) to be regarded as at least belonging to the category of the science-fiction film, or that Vincente Minnelli intended *An American in Paris* (1951) as a musical. There is no reason to suppose that these attributions of categorical intention are mistaken. In the same way the assertoric intention of a nonfiction filmmaker is a categorical intention, and it is not, therefore, the kind of intention at which the intentional fallacy argument is directed.

But which are the extrinsic film elements, which enable the viewer to grasp the author's intention?

5. Relevance of the film's indexing

The filmmaker usually expects that the spectator organises his perceptions and background knowledge so as to decide whether a work is nonfiction. But how does the spectator determine that the filmmaker has the assertoric intention that he, the spectator, adopts the assertoric stance when he sees the film? Or, in a more general way, since the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is not based solely on intrinsic textual properties, has the viewer to explore also the extrinsic context of production, distribution and reception? Carroll and Plantinga refer to the notion of *indexing* in order to explain the differences between the two macrogenres⁴⁶: producers, writers, directors, distributors and exhibitors label the films as to the type of films they belong, and where these labels index the films as "fiction" or "nonfiction" the audience has immediate access to the information about the fictive or assertoric intentions of the filmmaker. The particular indexing of a film mobilises expectations and activities on the part of the viewer; in this way people settle

⁴⁶ Carroll (1983) and Plantinga (1996).

on adopting a global attitude of belief toward these movies and broadcasts. Namely, a film indexed as nonfiction leads the spectator to expect a discourse that makes assertions or implications about actuality. In addition, as Plantinga observes: “the spectator will take a different attitude toward those states of affairs presented, since they are taken to represent the actual, and not a fictional, world”⁴⁷. Because when the spectator takes note that a film has been indexed as nonfiction, he takes its explicit claims for assertions; even its implications have a force of assertion.

Notice that indexing is a social phenomenon and, to a degree, is independent from individual uses of the film. Trying to better define this point, it is possible to affirm that the film’s index is not merely an inference by the spectator, but a property or element of the text within its “historical context”⁴⁸. The spectator must discover how a film is indexed, and he might be mistaken: if he were to call *Star Wars* a nonfiction film, he would be making a false claim about its conventional use. Similarly, the viewer could approach Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) as an ornithological documentary about sea gulls behaviour, and Luis Buñuel’s *Land Without Bread* (1932) as fictional because he believes that in Spain there never existed such tartarean places. In both cases, however, if he were to identify *The Birds* as nonfiction and *Land Without Bread* as fiction, his identification would be mistaken. Indexing, like the naming of objects generally, lies within the domain of social convention. The viewer is free to use these films for whatever purposes he likes - and this is neither a question of denying the importance of alternative readings and unconventional uses, nor of restricting them – but unconventional uses do not make *The Birds* nonfiction. At the same time it must also be noted, with the words of Plantinga, that “no index is indelible; all may change with time,

⁴⁷ Plantinga (1996), p. 311.

⁴⁸ Plantinga (1997), p. 19.

since social conventions change. The point is that indexing is a social phenomenon, and to a degree is independent of individual uses of the film”⁴⁹. The way a film is indexed is a perfectly public matter; there is nothing occult or obscure about it. Hence, the audience has access to the author’s assertoric intentions in many ways: press releases, advertisements, television interviews, film and television programs, previews, critical reviews, word of mouth and, moreover, information in the title cards of the film may also be relevant.

In this way, through many redundant public channels of communication, the typical viewer knows the kind of film he is about to see: when we choose to see a film, we generally know that it is what is called a “documentary” before we see it, because the film has been indexed and circulated in that way. Having this information at our disposal we know that we are intended by the filmmaker to adopt what Carroll called the assertoric stance.

It is also possible that during television zapping the viewer stops on a film whose indexing is unknown to him. Perhaps he wonders what kind of film he is watching, but he comes to discover it pretty quickly: by looking it up in a television guide, using the content, the look, or the sound of the film as evidence about the category to which it belongs, or waiting for the end credits which will generally provide helpful information to the film indexing.

In this view, the primary distinction between fiction and nonfiction films lies in the realm of discursive function and social contract, and not in the use of moving photographic images as recordings or imitations. Although we may use both for similar purposes, for example to warn each about the danger of the nuclear deterrence policy⁵⁰, they nonetheless constitute different means in order to achieve the same end.

⁴⁹ Plantinga (1998), p. 20.

⁵⁰ As Nicholas Meyer’s *The Day After* (1983) and Peter Watkins’ *The War Game* (1965).

SECTION II

What *is* docu-fiction?

Since its creation, cinema always had a capital imperative: enjoy the public. The 7th art, like dance, painting or sculpture, is created in order to be enjoyed with the sight and, perhaps more than any other kind of art, to be liked independently from the genre to which it belongs to: it does not matter if what we are offered to watch (at the cinema or in television) is a social documentary, an action-movie or an animation film. How would it otherwise ensure its survival, knowing the considerable financial amounts required for its production? It is therefore normal that the concept of spectacle assumes all the importance we are witnessing nowadays.

Indeed, whatever it is the genre of film and its subject, in order to obtain funds, a project must follow all the stages of the traditional cinematographic production: from the development of the idea to the in-cinema-presentation it is necessary that it always reflects a commercial ideal. It becomes therefore obvious that even the documentary film cannot avoid this pressure. But that is only one, and not even the most prominent, of the elements which stand at the basis of the documentary hybridisation process. Another catalytic agent – as sustained by the filmmakers – can be identified in the need for new expressive explorations: fictionalisation is used as a means in order to achieve otherwise unrealisable ends. However, the real reasons which have primed this “blurring” process are much more complex and less evident. They will be examined in the following chapters of this second section.

Nevertheless, the docu-fiction film performs two major functions: to inform and entertain⁵¹. Although information and entertainment may be conceptually distinct, from a practical point of view they are hopelessly tangled. And docu-fiction films are one of the chief vehicles for delivering both information and entertainment. A Phenomenon which is not of recent date, in spite of scholars, as Carlo Mandolini, who sustain that it is a completely new form⁵². History of cinema illustrates how that process was broadly used even formerly, in order to embrace the spectacular in the traditional documentary film. But nowadays only the macrogenres' blending assumes such an extensive dimension that becomes of priority importance to pay there a little more attention.

6. Gestation of the docu-fiction mode

I wish here to recall the first significant manifestations of the hybridisation process, bringing out some of the leading works which allow to draw the first appearances of the blending of documentary and fiction since the dawning of the moving picture.

Whoever studies the evolution of the documentary film cannot ignore the paramount importance of Robert Flaherty (1884-1951). His corpus of works, although very limited in number⁵³, is nowadays still pregnant of interest. Primarily, the paternity of the first "popular" documentary is attributed to

⁵¹ Note that the term *entertainment* obscures "the fact that [it] also has informational content that usually cultivates conventional themes, outlooks, and perspectives" (Barnouw and Kirkland, 50).

⁵² Mandolini (1991), p. 24.

⁵³ Flaherty made only five feature films: *Nanook of the North* (1922), *Moana* (1926), *Man of Aran* (1934), *Elephant Boy* (1937) and *Louisiana Story* (1948).

Flaherty, since *Nanook of the North*, which was distributed in 1922, obtained a very large commercial success. Furthermore, the uncommon universe of the subarctic Canada, presented in such a plain way through the facts and the deeds of Nanook and his family, had all the necessary elements to attract the audience's sympathy.

The aspect of primary interest, however, is the method employed by the director in order to fully shape his subject. His first concern was to describe in the most faithful way the culture of this people. Rather than filming in a simple and "objective" way Nanook's deeds, he decided to take an active role in the whole development of the events. Thus, Flaherty preferred to recur to a form of *mise-en-scène*, to set up a sort of complicity between him and Nanook, in order to reconstitute the main events which compose the Inuit's daily life. Some scholars see a deceit in the use of these means, since, for instance, the scene of the seal hunt is in fact a skilful editing of two distinct huntings which took place in different moments. This ruse should nevertheless be perceived as a "truth research" rather than an attentant to the integrity of the subject. Hence, the result overflows the simple and neutral description of a filmed event.

The first scene of the film is particularly eloquent from this point of view. The camera shows the audience Nanook who docks alone with his kayak. After his stepping out followed, from the boat's aperture, his wife, then his mother, his father, the son and finally the domestic dog, in a way that it seems that they all travelled together in such a tiny boat. This scene, visibly the result of an ingenious artifice, is much more oriented to gain the audience's sympathy rather than to make this situation credible. It is a clearly recognisable deceit which tinges with humour the beginning of the film and allows the "informed viewer"⁵⁴ to theorise on Flaherty's practice. The question is not to know *what* the director shows the viewer, but *how* he does it. Though the term "docu-fiction" exists only since the 80s, it is of primary importance to note that the famous blending of documentary and fiction is not a discovery or an invention

⁵⁴ "Informed viewer": the one acquainted with film theories and techniques.

of the last two decades. Documentary filmmakers have regularly resorted to fiction in order to better exploit their subjects. Flaherty was perfectly aware of the spectacular dimension of his approach, and judged it proper to his own goals. Moreover, he mastered perfectly the subject, since he spent many years with Nanook and his family observing them. Therefore, no gratuitousness can be found in his depiction.

The Polish director Dziga Vertov (1896-1954) also deserves a slice of attention for the importance of his works and the originality of his approach to documentary. In 1918 Vertov works at the *Kinonédélia*, a Soviet actuality cinema journal, composed of the assemblage of images without any artistic or aesthetic value. The only purpose of these short-films is to inform, no other intent is contemplated. Exasperated and unmotivated from this sort of work, he will later found the cinematographic magazine *Kino-Pravda*, which allows him to create a new kind of art. Furthermore, his first writings encouraged a kind of cinema oriented toward rhythm and movement, in order to push the national cinema out of his lethargy.

In 1922, he starts to realise actuality films which allow him to experiment new forms and styles of editing and a new approach to the filmmaking. He accompanies, for instance, the technicians during the shots, in order to preplan the editing. Furthermore, Vertov deserts the traditional and conventional method which consisted in showing the actuality footages in a chronological order. He opts for a thematic approach which transmits a new energy to this kind of film. Actuality films are now conceived no more with an exclusive informative goal, but even with the intention to develop a purpose about an idea or a theme, which imprints completely new dynamics to the documentary film. Thus, the same year, thanks to these new theories and to their efficacy, Vertov establishes the *Kino-Glaz* (Cine-eye), which is aimed to *catch reality in the act*⁵⁵. It is, in other words, oriented toward the employment of telephoto and hidden cameras in order to film “truth” without any artifice. In

⁵⁵ Mitry (1971), p. 113.

this way, Vertov annulling himself behind the absolute objectivity – or so presumed – of the movie camera, films in attempting to capture people in their natural behaviours and eschew from affectations or falsely natural attitudes. This kind of filming will be highly criticised by filmmakers and scholars who see rather a kind of image manipulation, and so to say, of espionage. Besides, Vertov will completely abandon this method to devote himself to film without hiding the camera, and letting all the technical tools at sight.

Afterward, in 1929, Vertov realises *Celovek s Kinoapparatom* (The Man With a Movie Camera), which can be considered as the final result of his theoretical and practical research. This film, maximum expression of the Cine-eye, describes the technical possibilities of the movie camera and of the “captured” image. Vertov discloses the film’s production stages and demystifies the creation of the feature film. It is neither more nor less than a *meta-documentary*: a documentary which explains the fabrication of a documentary. With *Celovek s Kinoapparatom*, Vertov tries to go beyond the appearances, but his major contribution has to be found at the level of the editing: he utilises the images “taken” from reality in order to reorganise them and create in this way a new depiction of reality. He composes a completely new actuality starting from previous *real* elements. The filmed images become in this way some kind of material which can be manipulated during the editing and modelled in such a way that it acquires a totally new sense.

Vertov, thanks to his live shootings and editing theories, has been considered one of the chief forerunners of direct cinema, in such an extent that the sixties’ filmmakers borrowed from him the term “cinéma vérité” (literal traduction of *Kino-Pravda*) to designate the nascent direct cinema⁵⁶. But as previously stated, of paramount importance are his revolutionary editing theories. Before him, editing was nothing but a simple manipulation process

⁵⁶ Two prominent schools include the French school which emphasises using the camera as a catalyst, while the American school emphasises the passivity of the camera treating it as an objective observer.

oriented to paste and juxtapose images beforehand assembled on paper. Vertov demonstrated that it was possible to impress a new dynamics to reality, that facts could be manipulated and also that authenticity of some images could be called in question. Thus, Vertov employs material which possesses a proper sense and reshapes it with a new meaning by the help of editing processes. In this sense, it is not so far away by the one proper to the fiction film.

Finally, the role played by the works of Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948), soviet filmmaker whose importance is determined by several reasons, cannot be forgotten. The cinema based on the editing experimented by Vertov can be found in an amplified way in some of Eisenstein's films, who pushed the art of representation further on. Thanks to his *noncontinuity editing*, the soviet director allows meaning to arise from contrasting images, rhythms, and graphic details. *Bronenosec Potëmkin* (Potemkin), realised in 1925, is still closely debated by scholars. Nowadays this masterwork continues to amaze thanks to his usage of montage: the shooting and the rapidly interspersing of separate shots force a given impression on the mind of the viewer. The use of this technique is most spectacular in the famous so-called Odessa steps sequence, with a rapid series of scenes showing the precarious progress of an unattended baby carriage down a monumental outdoor staircase, a woman being shot, a student recoiling in horror, and troops moving the crowd along with poised bayonets.

Eisenstein approved Vertov's ideas, particularly in relation to his approach of *Kino-Pravda* (or *cinéma vérité*): shooting without actors and heroes so as to confer more importance to the events, putting on stage the man of the street, or the mass in its spontaneous manifestation. This is the reason for which his films *Bronenosec Potëmkin* and *Oktjabr'* (October, 1927), which are staged reconstructions, become so similar to actuality films. Eisenstein employs elements of "real life" and reorganises them with his singular film-editing technique and his reconstruction ability, creating in this way a revolutionary cinema based on rhythm and formal research. These are the

elements which, put together and tied to wiry images, impresses to *Bronenosec Potěmkin* a quasi-documentary dimension.

7. Introducing docu-fiction's main features

Audiovisual forms and genres frequently offer resemblances and explanations of elements of society and culture. As well as offering a resemblance between what is depicted and some aspect of an anterior reality docu-fiction films offer a strong intertextual relationship between two forms that elsewhere are kept rigorously separate. Docu-fiction programs suggests an equivalence between fiction (i.e. drama) and documentary that, in audience terms, is provocative (because it makes themselves ask in what ways any drama can be “documentary” and any documentary “drama”). These programs offer a form – not-documentary, not-drama – through which the audience is challenged to reconstruct its mental model of the real by means of codes both documentary and dramatic.

As noticed by Paget, the two areas can be contrasted through the matrix opposite: “This is intended to help rethink the dramadoc/docudrama [i.e. docu-fiction] as an intertextual form, negotiating (and provoking or encouraging negotiation) between the documentary and the drama columns”⁵⁷. Particular films will sometimes be closer to one column, sometimes closer to the other.

⁵⁷ Paget (1998), p. 134.

Table of “documentary” and “drama” features

Documentary	Drama
<i>Theoretical categories</i>	
Realm of “non-fiction”	Realm of “fiction”
Heavy emphasis on “fact”	Light emphasis on “fact”
Sobriety	Entertainment
Rationality	Imagination
Authenticity	Credibility
The prior referent	Imitation of an action
Objectivity	Subjectivity
Particular truth	Essential truth
<i>Practice</i>	
Author’s assertoric intention	Author’s fictive intention
Research/accuracy	Invention/creativity
The journalist/researcher	The writer/creator
Unrehearsed pro-filmic events	Rehearsed pro-filmic events
Real-world individual	Character
Behaviour	Acting
Commentary/statement	Dialogue
Exegesis (e.g. captions)	Diagnosis
Montage	Mise-en-scène
Location/non-design	Setting/design
Natural light	Key light
Location (messy) sound	“Balanced” (clean) sound
<i>Audience</i>	
Assertoric stance	Fictive stance
Belief	Make-belief (i.e. suspension of disbelief)
Consideration of issues	Identification/empathy
Comprehension (through the mind)	Apprehension (through the senses)
Distance	Closeness

From the audience's position the notion of intertextuality means that the more texts it knows, the more likely will different texts show through the particular text with which it is dealing at the time. This is useful because it connects texts with one another in a relationship that is more than a simple one of similarity or dissimilarity; it articulates a way of viewing the world through texts. Thus, the audience looks not so much for originality as for confirmation that certain structures of representation are still helpful in making sense of its lives.

The docu-fiction retains an intertextual relationship to the documentary in its active "pointing" to an anterior circumstance in a dissimilar but comparable way. At a functional level the docu-fiction and the documentary proper share territory rather than dispute it. The docu-fiction is an inherently *indexical form*⁵⁸: it points more insistently towards its origins in the real world than other kind of "pure" drama. In docu-fiction films the audience is always more immediately aware of the dramatic pointing than of the place pointed to. But the latter enters its consciousness at "second looking", in the same way that we look past an actor representing to the historical original, for instance, Denzel Washington interpreting Malcolm X in Spike Lee's homonymous film. From its "moment of presentation" in fictional, dramatic form docu-fiction points beyond the realm of fiction to a realm of non-fiction, that is always already-lived. Bill Nichols observes that "the distinction between fact and fiction blurs when claims about reality get cast as narratives"⁵⁹. That means that the audience enters a zone where the world put before it lies between one not its own and one that very well might be, between a world it may recognise as a fragment of its own and one that may seem fabricated from such fragments, between indexical (authentic) signs of reality and cinematic (invented) interpretations of this reality.

⁵⁸ *Indexical* is here used in its Peircean sense, namely referring to signs that bear a physical trace of what they refer to, such as fingerprint, photographs, etc.

⁵⁹ Nichols (1994), p. IX.

In the docu-fiction, documentary's promise of privileged access to information is added to drama's promise of understanding through an entertaining experience. As sustained by Mandolini: "Le recours au docu-fiction permettrait à l'oeuvre de faire davantage appel à l'imaginaire du spectateur, à son sens du jeu, du divertissement et du spectacle, rejoignant ainsi le but premier recherché par le grand public lorsqu'il va au cinéma ou qu'il regarde une émission à la télévision"⁶⁰. In this way the camera access two different kinds of reality:

1. a record of external events (which still constitutes the basis of the documentary's appeal); and
2. a simulated reality of acted events.

The promise of the camera (its documentary offer to show events to an audience distant in place and time as though that audience were present) is extended, but only as a defining paradox: the camera's promise cannot be fully delivered in actuality since there are places either where it cannot go or where it can no more go (in the case of past and finished events, for instance). In the docu-fiction those things which the camera has missed or which it cannot get at can still be shown, but only up to a point and at a price. The audience who accepts the extension of the camera's documentary showing do so increasingly within the context of dramatic make-believing. In this way, following the moment of reception, the mechanism of belief is as often disabled by the docu-fiction's codes and conventions as it is enabled.

I wish now to trace the conceptual origins of this controversial film form, whose difficulties arise from its challenge to the limits of representation. Where did docu-fiction come from? Some scholars affirm that this hybrid form "comes from a belief that truth can be established from evidence. Central to this belief is the almost mythic status of the camera as a provider of this

⁶⁰ Mandolini (1991), p. 10.

commodity”⁶¹. The camera’s power as witness is central to the representational code of docu-fiction.

8. Docu-fiction’s conceptual origin

Still nowadays, it is not unusual to find people for whom *seeing is believing* and for whom *the camera cannot lie*. And this in spite of greater sophistication of the media in the developed world and in spite of the efforts of media theorists – from McLuhan to Baudrillard – to demonstrate the constructed nature of all representation. This belief in the evidential seems more than likely to survive and to continue to provide a basis for both the document and the documentary.

Without doubt the camera is one of the major inventions of the industrial age. Like the telephone and the television, the camera has been part of the twentieth century’s transformation of time. Ways of being and seeing that are now accepted as the norm are actually part of a world created after the first Industrial Revolution. By general consent, this world is one that is more individualised and less collective than the previous one. And like so many of the great inventions since the mid-nineteenth century, the photographic and electronic camera as developed and employed by Western civilisations have been inexorably privatising instruments.

The confident belief in the camera is based on two central elements. The first is that the camera will “hold back time”, both from the private and public perspective. This is the leap of faith made by the entire audience when it uses its cameras to record those moments in its lives which it wishes to fix into memory, to record them for a later contemplation. As true for private as well as public moments, the perception of the significance and nature of

⁶¹ Paget (1998), p. 83.

events after they have occurred will sometimes imbue a picture (especially the moving one), with a significance unimaginable to the actual recorder of the moment. For instance, in the case of Abraham Zapruder's recording of John Fitzgerald Kennedy's death in 1963, the camera filmed the "instant" in which a public event became *history*.

Nichols observed that "the indexical bond of photochemical and electronic images to that which they represent, when framed by optical lenses that approximate the properties of the human eye, provided endless fascination and a seemingly irrefutable guarantee of authenticity"⁶². Access to moving images via the movie and video camera increases the paradox of the moment snatched from time even more, grounding memory not in lived reality but in reproduced photographic and electronic images that are "not still" but in motion as often as the images are shown.

The evidential status contemporaneously *reveals* and *veils* meaning. JFK certainly dies again every time that the Zapruder recording of his assassination is reviewed, but the audience does not understand this death any better. No wonder that Oliver Stone could make a whole film (*JFK*, 1993) only about interpretation of the evidence available from that day.

That is the other basic element upon which the authority of the camera is built: that it will give the audience the access to external events that would otherwise be lost except through the very different agency of report. The Zapruder footage is viewed again and again partly because it is always apparently more than an eye-witness report. As such, it should tell the audience more than a simple witness can, because witnesses can only describe discursively what has passed before its eyes in the moment of the occurrence. A permanent image on a film from a camera which "witnessed" the scene should be able to say more. For instance, to solve the unsolved mystery of whether Kennedy was killed by one or more assassins. Zapruder's footage has been examined again and again; it has been the subject of renewed analysis by new frame-by-frame technology.

⁶² Nichols (1991), p. 149.

Nevertheless, the more it is studied, the more it becomes evident that it is not, nor has it ever been, a transparent record of the event it depicts.

It was in the moment of Kennedy's death that the twentieth century discovered that the camera could represent reality in a distorted way. Terence Donovan argued that "the magic of photography is metaphysical. What you see in the photograph isn't what you saw at the time. The real skill of photography is organised visual lying"⁶³. The emphasis has now shifted to the possibilities of construction and invention intrinsic in new post-production technologies, which increasingly threaten the camera's potential as an objective recorder of pro-filmic events. The ingenuous faith in the possibility to access in a direct way events through the camera may have been challenged through theoretical debate since the Second World War and may now be under threat from new digital technology, but Western cultures continue to keep the faith because deferred promises of objective proof are historically based in ongoing technical progress. Examples of this tendency to keep the faith despite intellectual scepticism are easily found and often assume that technical advance will make mediations somehow "more real" than they were before. The record of an event, whether private or public, is always more authentic if it offers immediacy. But ultimately this immediacy – this authenticity – is felt by an audience rather than being inherent in a technical process. It is easy to assert authenticity, but it is more difficult to prove it philosophically.

8.1 Docu-fiction and belief

Docu-fiction film's particular set of representational codes and conventions appeals to belief just like any other kind of convention in representation, and the appeal to belief is anchored in this distinctively twentieth-century faith in images, especially moving ones. The audience accepts what it sees

⁶³ Donovan, Terence (19 November 1983) *The Guardian*, London.

according to its previous knowledge and experience. To the degree that it has been persuaded by the documentary and convinced by the drama in previous manifestations of the form, its knowledge and experience encourage it to think that it will enjoy further exposure to such representation. In fiction films it is possible to observe that conventions of any kind are the condition on which the bargain of the make-believe (i.e. suspension of disbelief) is struck with the audience. That means that there is pleasure to be found in any set of conventions that are well understood and widely shared. However, if the conventions becomes out of date or difficult to give credence to, or if they have been trumped in some way by new forms, significant change must occur, otherwise the form will disappear.

It was the prominent rise of television in the fifties that made this decade the time of emergence for generic conventions of all kinds. It was only gradually that these conventions began to be questioned, both inside and outside the television industry and to be changed. And so docu-fiction's generic conventions – from the use of captions to voiceovers, from the way documentary material is used to editing techniques – are also quintessentially televisual. In docu-fiction the camera's ability to go anywhere and see anything is both borrowed from documentary on behalf of the drama and extended by the drama on behalf of documentary. They go together to increase the camera's truth claim by denying its real deficiency, namely that it was not there in fact, but the audience pretends it was in fiction. Thus, docu-fiction film clearly embodies a paradox: "it generates a distinct tension between performance and document, between the personal and the typical, the embodied and disembodied, between, in short, history and science"⁶⁴. In other words, one draws attention to itself, the other to what it represents; one is poetic and evocative, the other evidential and referential in emphasis. The audience's viewing is disembodied; with Paget's words: "it is in the 'there-but-not-there' realm of the record at the same time as we [the audience] inhabit

⁶⁴ Nichols (1994), p. 97.

the 'I-am-there' identificatory realm of the drama"⁶⁵. In both cases the hidden corporeal presence behind the camera in real time is composed of a whole film crew, but when the audience watches it is completely alone as it struggles with the requests of evidence and belief. Therefore, the camera's promise of "complete" seeing can achieve completion only if audience's heartstrings are touched dramatically as well as its understanding increased intellectually. And that is docu-fiction films' dynamics: the actuality segments grant authority and credibility to the fictional ones, and the fictional segments grant emotive participation to the actuality ones.

Note that genuine hybrids, works mixing fiction with assertion, are the result of the author's embedding of both fiction-making and assertive communicative intentions. Nevertheless, in the docu-fiction film the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction do not break down. It is not part of my argument that viewers can always be sure of a movie's assertive or fictive force. Nor do I suggest that a calculating or blundering filmmaker cannot either confuse an audience as to his work's genre or create the kind of work that begs the question of its genre affiliation. I merely claim that a movie's status as a docu-fiction depends proximally upon the author's mixing intentions that his audience has to believe and, alternatively, to make-believe (imagine) distinct parts of the movie.

8.2 A pragmatic approach: *The War Game* case study

In *The War Game* (1965) filmmaker Peter Watkins uses fictional scenarios to predict the possible consequences, for the British people and their civil defence systems, of nuclear war. The author, rather than merely asserting that the states of affairs he is presenting occur in the actual world as portrayed, invites the viewer to imagine certain non-actual, but possible,

⁶⁵ Paget (1998), p. 89.

situations. Watkins uses imagery and sound to relate a fictional story of the terrifying circumstances leading up to and following a nuclear strike on a civilian target in Kent. But this narrative is not anchored in any actual offensive against this territory: Watkins does not know or for that matter believe that this region has been attacked as shown; he possess no information about any actual, particular catastrophe involving Kent's destruction by missiles carrying nuclear warheads. In this way *The War Game* describes two imaginary situations: one of these is Kent's destruction; the other is the imaginary documentary movie *The War Game* describes, that is, the one that is the product of Watkins' intention to assert that an actual nuclear war proceeded as depicted and that contains footage naturally counterfactually connected to the look of Kent in ruins and its inhabitants dying in firestorms.

The film's main goal is to assert that the consequences of nuclear attack are likely to resemble to the depiction of the imaginary disaster in Kent. The fictional narrative's primary importance is not that it is imaginary that Kent has been attacked and that various imaginary predicaments follow. Rather, the purpose of the fiction-making and the imaginary scenarios is to illustrate other actual kinds of situations in the interests of criticising both the uselessness and the inadequateness of public policies concerning nuclear weapons and preparedness. The competent viewer will thus recognise that he is watching, for instance, a fictional portrayal of a homeowner's refusal to give refuge to evacuees. But at the same time, the viewer will see that this scene is meant to assert a number of propositions about the probable unreliability of civil defence mechanisms in the advent of an actual disaster. In other words, the viewer realises that he has to make-believe that a homeowner of such a description refuses to house evacuees; and he thereby recognises that Watkins asserts that implementation of a disaster response plan will be problematic in more or less the ways implied or explicitly shown by the staged scene.

Before the movie ends, the author makes explicit that the contents of its speculative representations have been selected in order to correspond with a

number of empirical hypotheses regarding the immediate as well as long-term effects of a nuclear war. So even if the viewer only make-believes that the people on screen are the victims of nuclear fallouts, he recognises both that the reason for this complex *mise-en-scène* is the expression of an assertion to the effect that this kind of suffering could occur, and that it should believe that it could occur because the filmmaker has undertaken various truth-seeking procedures, such as consulting the appropriate experts and investigating the historical records regarding the destruction of Dresden and Hiroshima. For this reason Watkins' *The War Game* contains a fictional documentary but overall is itself an actual one.

It becomes insofar evident how this case is highly representative of docu-fiction's compelling mix between the author's/audience's assertive and fictive intention/stance, between, ultimately, believing and make-believing.

In order to elucidate at the best the docu-fiction problematic and answer to the question "What is docu-fiction?", it is useful to tackle the difficulty of the name and the bewildering labelling. The compound term of the title of my memoir – "docu-fiction" – will be now subjected to a word-search intended to define present usage and to reveal the great terminological confusion which arose over time.

9. Terminological amorphism: a map

The keywords in writing and discussion about docu-fiction are revealing of more than just an "audiovisual" culture. The sheer proliferation of words and phrases that have been coined to categorise the forms of programs that mix fiction and documentary is in itself remarkable. The phrases, compound nouns and noun-coinages in question are drawn mainly from four root words:

“documentary”, “drama”, “fact” and “fiction”. Revising Paget classification⁶⁶, these terms can be grouped under three main combinative categories:

1. Combinations that use *documentary* and *drama* and that begin with “drama”, or a derivative of that word:

- *Dramatised documentary*
- *Dramatic documentary*
- *Drama documentary* (or *drama-documentary*; *drama/documentary*)
- *Dramadoc* (or *drama-doc*)
- The phrase *dramatic reconstruction* can conveniently be included in this list, since “reconstruction” identifies a documentary film.
- Also *fictionalised documentary* and *theatrical documentary* can be comprised in this category, inasmuch as “fictionalised” and “theatrical” stand for “dramatised”.

2. Combinations that lead with *documentary* or a variant of it, or that modify it with a prefix of some kind:

- *Documentary fiction*
- *Docu-fiction*
- *Semi-documentary*
- *Documentary-style*
- *Documentary drama* (or *documentary-drama*; *documentary/drama*)
- *Docudrama* (or *docu-drama*)
- *Docutainment* (or *infotainment*)

The last coinage leads to the heart of a cultural dilemma that is focused as much on the information/entertainment binary as on the fact/fiction one, but “info” here supplies a documentary function.

3. Noun-coinages and phrases based on *fact* and either using or implying the word *fiction*:

⁶⁶ Paget (1998), p. 91.

- *Faction*
- *Fact-based drama*
- *Fact-based fiction*
- *Fact-fiction drama (or fact/fiction drama)*
- *Based on fact*
- The common labels *reality-based film* and *based on a true story* can also be incorporated into this category.

Far and away the commonest confusion in usage has been between categories 1 and 2. Some scholars, as the British Paul Kerr, erroneously did not make any distinction between the “documentary drama” and the “dramatised documentary”, and tried to resolve the problem by using “DD”⁶⁷. Using the two initial letters of the two most popular coinages he hoped to avoid having to distinguish between them. Others, like the American Alan Rosenthal, “for the sake of simplicity”⁶⁸ only use one of them; and some more candidly use both in an interchangeable way, without looking after their real implications.

The form and the debates on docu-fiction highlight questions about the nature of the real and the limits of representations, about cinema and television themselves and their access to reality. Cinema’s, but especially television’s, omnipresence lies at the heart of the problem. These most popular (cinema) and accessible (television) of media have always provoked worry in all nation states’ governments, so that the idea of regulation (to control access and range) has never been far away: it is an uncertainty as to what can and cannot be shown which creates nervous reactions within institutional control. These nervous reactions are then exacerbated by a mass medium: the effects of all mediation may be a cause for concern, but minority mediations, as avant-garde theatre for instance, are generally

⁶⁷ Kerr (1990), p. 74.

⁶⁸ Rosenthal (1999), p. XIV.

perceived as less threatening and therefore manage to stay relatively free of regulation.

The common culture created by cinema first and television then has raised more difficulties than with the older mass media. The idea that the docu-fiction might need more regulation, in a medium that is becoming more and more regulated, is endemic. But it is mainly in television that docu-fiction has become the focus for real discussion, because television has developed mixed forms more systematically than either theatre or cinema. Particularly the public service television did this for three main reasons:

1. The first reason is of *philosophical* nature, because television's mission to inform, instruct and entertain determined matters of content and form.
2. The second reason is *technological*, for its need to overcome the early inadequacies of electronic reproduction led programme makers to "reconstruct" almost as a reflex.
3. The third reason is of *economical* nature, because documentary based programs are on average not so expensive as fictional ones.

Of all the words and coinages listed above, *docu-drama* and *dramatised documentary*, are the most used. The presence or absence of punctuation marks between the parts of a compound word (i.e. hyphens) enacts conceptual uncertainty, anxiety and confusion at the level of typography. As observed by Paget, when present, the grammatical "umbilical cord" makes a compound noun of an adjective-noun combination, proposing the kind of balanced equality for which filmmakers still argue but which scholars so often find lacking. However, independently how they appear typographically, one tends to regard the phrases as always oriented towards the second word⁶⁹. Thus, just as "dramatic" in the phrase "dramatic documentary" acts as an adjective modifying the noun "documentary", so "drama documentary" is a documentary treated dramatically. But "drama-documentary" claims a balance in which, perhaps, both will be equally present.

⁶⁹ Paget (1998), p. 93.

Consequently, “documentary drama” is a drama treated “documentarily”, but definitional problems can be illustrated when the word “documentary” is substituted by “historical”. “Historical drama” tells the audience immediately that it has to expect a play based on known history: it is a statement primarily about the origins of the narrative material with which the screenwriter or filmmaker has chosen to work. “Documentary drama”, however, is just as likely to tell the viewers about the style in which a film is made as it is about its basis in “documents”, its grounding on real facts.

As previously stated the both terms are often used as if there were no difference at all and they have become routinely interchangeable even within the same writing. Ongoing attempts to negotiate a path among all these competing terms have resulted in a confusion that can be thoroughly examined only thanks to the discussion of the history of both practice and usage carried on in the first part of this dissertation.

The “docu-fiction” denomination becomes so a great terminological free-zone, welcoming all the previously mentioned hybrid programs. The term “docu-fiction” is used in order to designate – in a misleading and imprecise way – the two main forms of fact-fiction mixing, namely both the dramatised documentary (in the strict sense) and the documentary drama (in a broad sense).

Probably, as observed by Paget, the debate around docu-fiction programs is kept going by two elements. The first is a continuous demand for clear definitions on the part of non-academic commentators and ordinary viewers. Documentary’s declared linkage to pro-filmic reality still gives it a sharper evidential quality and claim than fiction, and the docu-fiction borrows this. Second, the innate institutional conservatism of television feeds the common broadcasters’ desire for “clean” boundaries in their medium⁷⁰. The effort to be precise acknowledges a kind of responsibility towards content which is fundamental to the contract that broadcasters have with their audiences, and

⁷⁰ Paget (1998), p. 96.

which in recent times has occasioned a proliferation of *Producers' Guidelines* which firmly claim that "where fact and fiction are mixed the public should be made aware of this"⁷¹.

Mixtures of fiction and documentary do not constitute a genre in quite the same way as, for instance, western or melodrama films, all of which are regular features of cinema and television programming and are constantly present in the schedules. In television they can be found at least once a week and are regularly updated stylistically to suit new demands. But the docu-fiction program is usually a response to a very particular situation. Because it is an occasional feature of the schedules, discussions about it do not appear to take a step forward but are revisited again and again.

Let's now see which are the main results we are confronted to when the factual and fictional realms converge.

10. *One hybrid, multiple forms: the dramatised documentary and the documentary drama*

As seen in the first section of this memoir, documentary is *authorial* in that it is about creativity and transformation based on vision. In being this, it is also emphatically *dramatic*, as part of its bid for the public imagination. As observed by Paul Rotha: "*Documentary's essence lies in the dramatization of actual material*"⁷². As a practice and a form, documentary is strongly informationalist, but it is also an exercise in creativity, an art form drawing on interpretative imagination both in perceiving and using the sounds and images of the living scene to communicate the real. Process that in docu-

⁷¹ Petley (1996), p. 21.

⁷² Phrase quoted in Jacobs (1979), p. 12.

fiction films is extended to the maximum intensity. Thus, docu-fiction programs seem to answer to questions like: *How can I make my films better? How can I go beyond the limits? What kind of experiments can I do? How can we give a film more life?*

Nowadays, dramatisation has become a standard element in the popularisation of documentary, and has been controversially prominent in the shift towards merging “actuality” with “entertainment” values in the newer styles of programme concerned, for instance, with the reconstruction of accidents and of crimes⁷³. The use of dramatisation as the primary or exclusive mode of depiction also continues within the television schedules, making connections with a variety of fictional narrative styles and often looking and sounding very different from works produced during the classic period of the sixties, when the development of dramatised documentary ran alongside that of realist play.

Note that the term “drama” can be applied in two rather different ways to documentary material, even if both ways are finally related. First of all, it can be used to indicate the exciting, intensive character of an event; and, second, it can be used to indicate enactment (professional or otherwise, variously rehearsed or not): the bringing to documentary work features like scripting, acting and directional approaches typical of the fiction film. In other words, the production of an historical or imaginary event precisely for the purpose of spectatorship.

Derek Paget and John Corner observe that it is possible to see the combination of dramatic with documentary approaches as being organised within the terms of one or other of two main kinds of recipe⁷⁴:

1. the approach of *dramatised documentary* begins with a documentary base or core and uses – generally – recognisable dramatisation to overcome certain limitations and/or to achieve a more broadly popular and imaginatively powerful effect. In other words, it uses the sequence of

⁷³ Exemplar is Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988).

⁷⁴ Paget (1998), p. 82; Corner (1999), p. 35.

events from a real historical occurrence or situation and the identities of the protagonists to underpin a film script intended to provoke debate about the significance of the events or occurrence. Another possibility is that the “dramatised inputs” have no direct historical referent but are wholly imaginary depictions elaborated by the author in order to achieve entertaining or spectacular ends. The resultant film usually follows a cinematic narrative structure and employs the standard techniques of screen drama, when documentary material is directly presented, it is used in a way calculated to minimise disruption to the realist narrative. It is therefore possible to affirm that the dramatised documentary essentially is a “fictional oriented” documentary; that fiction is at the service of documentary.

2. The other approach, *documentary drama* (i.e. docu-drama), is essentially a form of “play”, but it is a form that is seen to develop a documentary character either as a result of its scale of referentiality to specific real events (private or public or both) or because of its manner of depiction. To put it in another way, documentary drama uses an invented sequence of events and fictional protagonists to illustrate the salient features of real historical occurrences or situations. The film script may or may not conform to a classic narrative structure; if it does not documentary elements may be presented non-naturalistically and may actively disrupt the narrative. But “documentary” in this form may refer to style or to content (and to be about the “look” and “sound” of documentary proper), in which case the structures of film naturalism are once more obtained. Thus, the documentary drama defines itself as a “factually oriented” fiction, or, in other words, as a product in which documentary is at the service of fiction.

It is important to keep apart in discussion these different reasons for making an attribution of documentariness to a program. In fact – quite apart from the previously seen problem of critical subjectivity in using such classification – sometimes it becomes quite hard to maintain a clear distinction between the two models.

To sum up, the features of these two forms can be represented in this way:

Form	(Re-)enactments	
	Events mise-en-scène's referentiality	Value
Dramatised documentary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical events • Unhistorical events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informative value - Entertaining value
Documentary drama	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical events blurred with imaginary patches 	

Obviously, informative and entertaining values do not exclude each other. Quite the reverse, usually these two values have a very close relationship of mutual benefit and dependence, even if the “senior” partner is only one of the two. Nevertheless, their ultimate goal is to increase the emotional impact on the audience and, to some extent, help to “sediment” – through the more exciting visual participation – informational content in the viewer’s mind.

But let’s see now which are the structural features of the two major docu-fiction forms, the ones proper to the documentary drama and the dramatised documentary.

11. Profile of docu-fiction forms

The history of docu-fiction must be defined according to the national contexts originators of the two major outcomes of the fact-fiction blending: Britain has the paternity of the dramatised documentary and the United States of the documentary drama. That means that two traditions of practice emerged with differing documentary and dramatic priorities, which are the results of

markedly different cultures and televisual institutions on either side of the Atlantic.

British television has always had a more developed role in public service than American television. Since the 1936 British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) beginning of a regular television service it has managed to sail quite successfully between the American unrestrained competitive system and the danger of Western European state control. However, actually the digital and technological revolution of cable and satellite television channels could be a source of menace for this essentially European institution, born out of the liberal state. The American system has always dominated economically, the British system being regarded as a model for responsible and non-commercial broadcasting.

In the United States the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) – founded only in 1969 – has only survived by adapting to the commercial environment in which it found itself. However, it is important not to claim simplistically that American television lacks a public service imperative altogether, since the PBS emphasises children's, cultural, and educational programming, as well as programs on nature, news, public affairs, science, and avocational activities, providing in this way a unique and valued service. The lack of a dedicated public service network can be attributed to the United States' status as the major capitalist nation of the early twentieth century.

Paget affirms that the cultural difference can be marked by the prominent public figures characterising the two traditions. The British broadcasting culture had Lord Reith as a founding father, a “sober, responsible, suspicious of popular taste, pre-eminently a colonial-style élitist administrator”. The United States' equivalent figure was David Sarnoff, head of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in its early years, an industrialist, entrepreneur, populist, visionary exploiter of new technologies and radio and television pioneer who proposed the first commercial radio receiver⁷⁵. The

⁷⁵ Paget (1998), p. 141.

national American predilection for entrepreneurial activity virtually ensured that broadcasting would be strongly commercial in orientation.

In the two national television systems the key post-war determinants that shaped the British dramatised documentary and the American documentary drama were, thus, economic, historical, cultural and political.

11.1 Dramatised documentary

According to John Corner⁷⁶ the “dramatised story documentary” was the first development of factual drama in British television, and was one of the forms used by the official film documentarists of the Second World War. These programs were based on the journalistic practices of pre-war BBC radio, which already had a reputation for mediating factual material through drama⁷⁷. “Radio features” in the thirties used documentary material in dramatised form in order to make subjects of public interest accessible. Thus, BBC television’s post-war dramatised story documentary was built upon that foundation element and the Griersonian documentary film. Although there were stylistic variations between the films, the essential idea was to take a documentary theme (the submarine service, the nightly bombing raids of the Royal Air Force, etc.) and treat this by “particularising” it around a story line with characters, which could be given an intimate rendering using the depictive methods of feature film. The result mixed informational segments with narrative ones, creating a form of empathy with the main figures of portrayal, whose experience and whose personal qualities were projected with greater intensity and focus than more conventional documentary formats could have achieved.

As with later forms of story documentary, the difference from the range of conventional feature fictions was discernible in a number of ways. Apart from

⁷⁶ Corner (1991), p. 34.

⁷⁷ Paget (1990), p. 5.

the intermixing of the dramatic material with “actuality” segments, perhaps the most obvious of these was the relationship between the story core of the film and the wider project of documentation. Although feature films frequently provided a strong real-life context for their stories, the story documentary had a mode of depiction that required it continuously to register the nature of circumstances that were happening to the side of the main narrative. This might mean closing in to focus on particular procedural matters (for instance, the aircraft bomb loading) or pulling back to look at the more general circumstances and processes of which the dramatised events were simply one part. The movement out from story to documentation and back was nearly always of a kind that would be considered deviant within the conventions of realists feature filmmaking: “there was simply *too much* time spent “out of story” looking at detail or establishing context”⁷⁸. Only when the author assumed the audience coming to the film with some expectations about being informed as well as entertained would the subsequent dispersal effect exerted on character interest and plot development be considered justifiable.

The television documentary filmmakers of the fifties were well aware of the story documentary mode, indeed many of them had worked on wartime productions themselves. However, their own use of dramatisation was initially prompted by a different set of requirements. Paramount here was the need to produce documentary television about circumstances and processes that could not be filmed directly either because of restrictions on television access or because of the technical limitations placed on live broadcasting. Without the option of videotape recording and with the expense of location shooting on film, the obvious solution was “dramatic reconstruction” in the studio. Within these exigencies, the kinds of narrative intensity and explorations of person, action, and space available to the wartime film productions were simply not possible. Therefore, documentary filmmakers managed to achieve an emphasis on the imitation of an action; the procedures of the drama were

⁷⁸ Corner (1991), p. 35.

allowing relations of proximity and offering an experience of witnessing. The simulacrum was a means of making up for the unavailability of the original and a means of managing affective power for full dramatic satisfaction. Note that the BBC regarded this kind of work with some anxiety as to the status attributed to it by audiences. Furthermore, there also was anxiety about repeating dramatised documentary: whilst it was common practice for plays to be repeated live, it was thought that this might greatly reduce the status of documentary output. This indicates both a full awareness of the extent to which artifice has replaced reality in the production and a concern not to let this knowledge spoil the “illusion” for the viewer. Related to the issue of artifice, its legitimacy, and its modes are the issues of generic distinction and generic blurring and therefore of audience perceptions and expectations. Even in the fifties, a clear distinction between what was dramatised and what was not could be hard to make. And this technique caused the first public debate about the ethics of such mixes on television. So, it is in the fifties that should be traced back the suspicion – now endemic in newspaper criticism of fact-based drama – that the audience is in danger of being fooled.

The arrival of new technology in the form of lightweight 16 mm film cameras and subsequently of videotape removed most of the conditions that had made early dramatised documentary on television an expedient and popular response to limitations. Dramatisation was no longer quite so necessary and projects of the kind described above were less frequently found in the schedules. However, as the wartime’s propaganda films had shown, the dramatisation of documentary material was still an effective way of performing certain communicative functions, of producing certain “effects”, and new types of function and new depictive modes were to emerge.

Dramatisation of varying kinds continued to be used in documentary work, but there is no doubt that the return to prominence of dramatised documentary as an issue had a lot to do with developments in the realist play during the sixties.

Much of the debate through the sixties and into the mid-seventies surrounded productions that, drawing on a variety of recipes for their “mix”, offered

radical, critical portrayals of contemporary British political and social life. Exemplary is Peter Watkins' *The War Game*, produced by the BBC in 1965 but not transmitted until the eighties. This depiction of a nuclear attack on a British town was banned from transmission at the time for reasons having to do with politics surrounding government nuclear deterrence policy. As with many other controversial dramatised documentaries, objections that were primarily about the substantive content and viewpoint expressed were strategically camouflaged into objections about the unacceptability of the form itself. Thus disagreement over issues, tackling an engagement around specific evidence and argument, becomes disguised as a fear about deception in communicative style. *The War Game* is without doubt a very disturbing film, using a particular kind of approach, it places the viewer as witness to catastrophic events in the future, as Britain enters a nuclear war. The passage from frantic preparation for possible attack through the strike itself and the resultant phases of physical, psychic, and social deterioration is depicted in a brilliantly edited mix of newsreel, direct cinema style and interview sequences. Its entire visual system reproduces the immediacy and rawness of actuality materials, it could therefore seem that it is more an "imitation documentary" rather than a dramatised documentary. However, the work of the imitation draws upon rigorous historical and contemporary sources in order to put forward solid arguments about the "way it would be" were a nuclear conflict to occur. This kind of productions drew extensively on dramatic imagination, but the degree of documentary evidence that went into the script gives them a distinctive character. This is in contrast to the more loosely referential "based on" formulas and the even looser relationship of contextual circumstances to historical reality in mainstream fiction film.

11.1.1 Features of the dramatised documentary

Dramatised documentary's most important aspect as a controversial form is the linking together of a viewpoint discourse with discourses of strong

referentiality and of high imaginative potency. Indeed, the dramatised documentary is characterised by a kind of deflection of documentary from what has been its most commonsensical purpose: “the development of strategies for persuasive argumentation about the historical world”⁷⁹. That means that if the dramatised documentary is placed within the framework proposed by Roman Jakobson’s six aspects of any communication (expressive, referential, poetic, rhetorical, phatic and metacommunicative), it marks a shift in emphasis from the referential as the dominant feature: it leads to a variable mix of the expressive, poetic and rhetorical aspects as new dominants. This shift blurs yet more strongly the already imperfect boundary between documentary and fiction.

Stress falls on the evocative quality of the text rather than on its representationalism. Realism, of course, is quite capable of drawing upon expressive qualities. Subjective camera movement, impressionistic montage, dramatic lighting, compelling music: such elements fit comfortably within a realist style but, in documentary, they are traditionally subordinated to a documentary logic, which is governed, in turn, by the protocols of the discourses of sobriety. Expressive qualities colour, inflect and flavour, but seldom determine the overall organisation of the text or the audience’s overall response to it. The dramatised documentary frees these expressive elements from their subordination to a logic. This kind of documentary can therefore be more iconic than indexical, being less heavily dependent on an indexical authentication of what is seen and heard. Errol Morris’ *The Thin Blue Line* offers vivid examples, perhaps none more so than the slow-motion flight of the vanilla ice-cream malt that sails through the night air in some of the re-enactments of the crime. It is possible to argue that dramatised documentaries rely much less heavily on argument than suggestion; they do not explain or summarise so much as imply or intimate.

⁷⁹ Nichols (1994), p. 94.

11.1.2 Pros and cons arguments in the dramatised documentary debate

Politicians, like Sir Ian Gilmour, affirm that “the so-called dramatisation or fictionalisation of alleged history is extremely dangerous and misleading, and is something to which the broadcasting authorities must give close attention”⁸⁰. No doubt that filmmakers should handle the fact-fiction blending with extreme wisdom, but the witch hunt atmosphere arose by politicians is mainly a kind of “stage fright”. As previously seen, the public debate on hot issues – particularly when the point of views expressed dissent from the official ones – is always dread by public authorities, and the numerous controversies arose during the years on this form have always focused on its “content”, although they were dissembled as being on the “form”.

Scholars, as Denyse Therrien, sustain that the hybridisation experience between documentary and fiction, in the case in which the last is a simple addition to the first, is not a concluding one. They affirm that the fictional discourse relativises the documentaristic one, instead of being of use to it. Mainly because “elle est souvent ratée du strict point de vue formel et paraît encore plus risquée du point de vue fonctionnel (idéologique)”⁸¹. But the dramatised documentary allows to do some things that could not be done in any other way and to articulate some important and difficult themes and ideas with a vividness and clarity that couldn’t be achieved by any other means. Thus, this particular type of documentary is no more dangerous than any kind of “pure” documentary or “pure” fiction film. The basic impulse behind the dramatised documentary form is simply to tell to a mass audience a real and relevant story involving real people. The basic problem is how to get it right after the event.

⁸⁰ Phrase quoted in Woodhead (1981), p. 101.

⁸¹ Therrien (1988), p. 38.

Corner observes that the key issues around which the dramatised documentary debate has turned can be defined in four distinct points: referentiality, representation, manipulation and theme⁸².

1. The *referentiality* issue. What tightness of relationship does the program claim with real events? Is it using a “based on” license or attempting (as faithful as possible) a “reconstruction”? “Based on” formulas can either allow dramatic transformations of specific events or allow the fictive construction of a “typical” case from research on real incidents.
2. The *representation* issue. How does the program look and sound? Is there an attempt to imitate the codes of documentary and thereby generate reportage values? Is there a mix of dramatic with more conventional documentary material?
3. The *manipulation* issue. This issue relates to the first two. The charge is made that viewers are encouraged to give truth status to unsubstantiated or purely imaginary elements and, furthermore, that the communicative, affective power of the dramatic treatment is likely to “install” accounts in the mind of the viewer with force and depth. Yet the problematic claim that by virtue of formal realism the film audience mistakes the (re)enacted events for real ones is highly doubtful. When viewing a film, the audience is aware that what it sees is a representation, and not the actual world. More plausibly, supporters of this issue might be construed to say not that spectators mistake what they see for the real thing, but that they automatically accept the film’s claims as accurate. But this is not convincing either. The audience is too sceptic and, furthermore, “realism does not guarantee a dumbfounded, gullible spectator”⁸³.
4. The *thematic* issue. In what way does the point of view to which is given prominence relate to “official” positions and attitudes? How is a debate of ideas set up within the program? As seen, behind some of the apparent concern expressed about hybrid forms lies the straightforward objection to

⁸² Corner (1991), p. 42.

⁸³ Plantinga (1997), p. 216.

specific point of views counteracting the dominant dispositions and policies.

11.2 Documentary drama

As previously mentioned, the different imperatives of American television produced a distinct kind of program from the “dramatised story documentary”: the documentary drama, which was influenced both formally and institutionally by the film industry. Formally, it was led by the narrative practices of the feature film. Institutionally, the 1948 Paramount judgement proclaimed an adjustment in the film industry to new, post-war industrial conditions that had a profound influence on the television networks.

The term “documentary drama” describes a wide, but particular, signifying practice in modern cultural production which exists in media both old (theatre), new (radio and cinema) and very new (television). As sustained by Derek Paget and Alan Rosenthal, it was the period between the two World Wars which was especially important in opening up new (and variously committed) ways of representing reality in theatre, on radio and on film; thus, the real expansion and development of documentary drama dates from the thirties, when the Hollywood studios produced fact-fiction epics⁸⁴. The birth of historical dramatisation as a popular genre was due to the fact that history offered both convenient and rich materials, and it was probably also a response, in part, to peoples’ desire to understand what was happening around them. But critics as George Custen affirm that Hollywood studios created and sustained for decades a monochromatic view of history: in the pretelevision era, Hollywood assumed a key role in setting out the public agenda for what topics were deemed to be of importance, and it also guided the public’s perception of these issues⁸⁵. In short, Hollywood studios were for

⁸⁴ Paget (1990), p. 5; Rosenthal (1999), p. 2.

⁸⁵ Custen (1992), p. 19-20.

years a major force in the “teaching” of history, a force probably more important than the home or the school. Hollywood’s objective was never to teach history but fashion drama through entertainment biographies and sensational scandals. As Eric Breitbart points out, one of the first appearances of documentary drama on the United States’ television was the *Armstrong Circle Theatre*, first broadcast in 1955⁸⁶. Stories were adapted from recent news events in order to arise interest, even controversy, on important and topical subjects. Note that Hollywood’s documentary dramas may be contrasted with British dramatised documentary of the same period in two respects: first, their strategic objective was commercial; second, their priorities were dramatic not documentary.

Production guidelines suggested that basic human characteristics should stand behind each documentary drama issue: courage, honour, love, righteousness, honesty, etc. These sentiments have shown a remarkable endurance in American programs over the past forty years. Worth noting is the documentary drama producers’ idea of what they were creating; David Wolper, one of the most prolific documentary drama producers, described what the documentary drama should convey as “[...] a sense and feeling of how it was [...]. It isn’t a book. You don’t go back and refer to it for information [...]. You see it once and whatever you remember of it stays with you. If what stays with you is the truth, how you got there, to me, is not overly relevant”⁸⁷. Subjects for documentary dramas were chosen because they were already in the public consciousness, because of current events, best-selling books or recognisable characters. Thus, history, in this view, is no longer a discipline to be studied, but a kind of disposable product to be used once and discarded. Historical events become totally subjective situations, to be judged by the audience’s response to the characters. But viewers “learn” from entertainment programs as well as from those consciously

⁸⁶ Breitbart (1981), p. 118. Note that 1955 is also a crucial year because movie studios had started to sell off their catalogues to television. Hence, Hollywood’s studios active participation in television production began.

⁸⁷ Phrase quoted in Breitbart (1981), p. 119.

“educational”, and both cinema and television are media which provide a way of viewing the world, not merely information.

In the American commercial model, television drama series used factual material to develop a form that pre-sold itself: this kind of “documentary in drama” approach became the well known “documentary drama”. In contrast, in Britain the concept of public service led to the development of the “dramatised documentary” approach. But British documentary dramas also exist(ed), in the form of serious dramas dealing with social realism. British forms took their colour in general from the discursive priorities of documentary and the discourse of sobriety.

In the United States synergy between the film and the television industries gradually increased the dramatic priorities in made for television documentary dramas, moving them further away from investigative journalism; American documentary dramas pursued the audience, emphasised entertainment value and had a rather loose regard for truth. In Britain a weak film industry influenced visual styles, but the journalistic link between documentary and drama remained as stronger endorsement of documentary claims. So, it is possible to argue that “in the USA an entrepreneurial concept of ‘public goods’ predominated over the ethical concept of ‘public good’”⁸⁸; in Britain the emphasis was reversed. In “public goods” program making, public *wants* are uppermost at the point of production; conversely, public *needs* are uppermost where “public good” is the consideration. Thus, the British and European tradition has, generally speaking, followed a more conscientious path: television documentary dramas such as Peter Watkins’ *Edvard Munch* (1974) and Roberto Rossellini’s *Blaise Pascal* (1971), or for the cinema François Truffaut’s *L’Histoire d’Adèle H* (The Story of Adèle H, 1975), demonstrate the possibilities of using the intimacy and accessibility of the medium to reach a mass audience with programs that attempt to convey the texture of a historical period in terms of real human experience.

⁸⁸ Paget (1998), p. 157.

11.2.1 American documentary drama's grounding elements

According to Milly Buonanno, the invasion of actuality issues in the fiction industry typical of the recent American documentary drama is due to a wide and interrelated series of factors⁸⁹.

Firstly, on a more general level, what can be defined as the “reality syndrome” seems have created a widespread and pressing tension to capture, monitor, scan, take part in and, to some extent, testify present time realities: its events, problems, human tragedies, social conflicts, etc.

Secondly, should be considered the strong surge of interest directed towards journalistic news, systematically registered during moments of crisis, conflict or of great transformation. Awaken from the fall of the communist régimes and from the Gulf War, and subject to further outburst, the attention for the news has evident relapses even in the fiction production, and it is equally both a component and a manifestation of the previously mentioned “reality syndrome”.

Third, the increasing intertextuality and autoreferentiality of the media discourses. In other words, the tendency to emphasise dynamics of mutual favorings, reflections, cross-references and citations almost entirely inside the media system itself.

Fourth, the modes proper of the televisual narrative process, which are based on seriality, reiteration, and the “return-of-the-already-known”. Of course, there exists a number of devices to articulate reiteration and introduce seriality into fiction; one of the most exploited devices is the narration of stories inspired by actuality issues, which repropose themes, problems, characters and events already made known to the public by the media, already entered into the collective conscience through the news.

Fifth and final element, the fiction's legitimation exigency, which takes its origin from the different status held by reality and narrative fiction. Since this last one is considered to be of dubious plausibility and dignity, producers

⁸⁹ Buonanno (1995), pp. 235.

make use of reality “infusions”, under the form of actuality issues and topics, in order to achieve its legitimation. But the fiction’s tendency to dramatise actuality issues is equally at the origin of a series of consequences. Fiction’s themes and stories dependence and disposition to be at the mercy of journalistic news makes it to become inevitably tributary of the rises and falls of news issues. Since it draws its narrative subjects mainly out of news and recovers themes and events which already are of public knowledge, documentary dramas contribute to reproduce the same restrictive and selective definition of “social reality” – dangerous subjects, emergencies, pathologies, crisis, disasters, etc. – that presides journalistic information.

11.2.2 *Features of the documentary drama*

The presumptions underlying the production of documentary drama are that its story should be told and that re-creation of actual events remains the best means of delivery. Recent features, as Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) and Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991), exemplify the indexical roots, the melodramatic coding and the consequent moral and ethical problems that will be taken into consideration.

Differently from the conventional documentary and similarly to the dramatised documentary, but in an extended way, documentary drama replaces (often ambiguous) indexical and unstaged images with a quasi-indexical narrative. Image and story claim a motivated and direct relationship to the events the film references to. Moreover, the documentary drama narrative foregrounds dramatic codes, assuming melodrama’s larger function of emphatically clarifying a broad moral system⁹⁰.

Without doubt, changes in the technology of film and video documentation since the Second World War raise epistemological as well as ethical

⁹⁰ Lipkin (1994), p. 370.

questions about the choice of a mode based on re-enactments, if one's purpose remains the evaluation of the work as a document. *Schindler's List* and in particular *JFK* explicit the problems inherent in documentary drama: "it strikes a moral pose free from the ethical concerns usually applicable when a documentary builds its positions from indexical imagery"⁹¹.

Scholars as Bill Nichols maintain an absolute and systematic distinction between documentary (which builds its cases from materials of the historical world) and fiction (which is constructed from materials that can only resemble the historical world metaphorically). Nichols' efforts to define documentary preclude any consideration of the truth value of documentary drama, since its re-enactments, or re-creations, relegate the form without hesitation to the realm of fiction. If on these terms documentary drama cannot assert documentary truth values about the historical world, it still maintains a close relationship to documentary. In other words, documentary drama argues with the seriousness of documentary to the extent that it draws upon direct and motivated resemblances to its actual materials. Exactly as "pure" fictions, documentary dramas offer powerful and attractive arguments about actual subjects, depicting people, places and events that exist(ed).

Even if documentary drama departs from the classical documentary, the two forms retain a kind of semiotic similarity. The evolving technology of mainstream documentary progressively has conformed representation of actuality: the documentary image functions as an index; comparable imagery in documentary drama remains essentially iconic. However, the films' often high degree of resemblance to actual people, places, actions and events suggests that documentary drama's imagery combines characteristics of iconic and indexical signs, creating what amounts to *indexical icons*, which are, according to the Peircean point of view, signs with direct and strongly motivated resemblances to their actual referents.

As seen documentary dramas take origin from known events and figures. The previous texts tend to include news stories, published accounts, and

⁹¹ Lipkin (1994), p. 371.

personal testimonies, such as Thomas Keneally's novel about Oskar Schindler or Jim Garrison's view of the Kennedy assassination. The existence of prior texts "guarantees" the choice of material for filmic treatment: "these events really happened and were important enough for reportage" it seems to be told to the audience. The audience is asked to consider that these events might have happened "this" way, in the version now offered as feature film documentary drama.

11.2.3 Ethical perspectives in the documentary drama

The fundamental question probably is: *Where is the centre of truth in this form and how believable or how suspect is it?* One of the underlying assumptions of documentary is that it is supposed to be more honest and accurate than fiction. In film, a hierarchy of truth has been established, whereby documentary stands higher than fiction. Though documentary drama aspires to join documentary on this upper level, the difficulty is that whole areas seem to become "equivocal" where fiction is presented as fact, as reality. For the most cases this does not cause too many problems: the audience perceives, for the most part, what is fact and what is fiction and where license with fact has been taken. But, as seen, there are situations where the mixing of fact with fiction and dramatisations masquerading as documentary can be dangerous and misleading. Alan Rosenthal has defined three major elements, the combination of which would create such a problematic situation. First of all, the audience should completely or almost completely misread the fiction as fact. Second, the misleading fictional elements must be of real consequence to the story and to the sense of the characters and the basic situation under discussion. Finally, the subject being presented must be one that can, or is meant to, affect the audience ongoing social or political attitudes in a fairly important way⁹².

⁹² Rosenthal (1994), p. 8.

The ethical complexities implied in the documentary drama will be taken into analysis through Oliver Stone's *JFK* case study. As melodrama forwards clear moral positions, *JFK* functions melodramatically in its efforts to wrestle order from the chaos created by Kennedy's assassination. As Steve Lipkin observes: "its 'creative use' of actual materials in fact creates a melodramatic search for a moral order"⁹³. In doing so, probably no other recent documentary drama has been as controversial, particularly regarding issues of the film's credibility, the accuracy of its re-enactments and the resulting validity of the point of view expressed on its subject. The case of *JFK* illustrates how ethical problems arise when documentary drama steps too far from known and actual events into the realm of speculation. Note that *JFK* contains more actual documentary footage than the great majority of all documentary dramas, a fact that could provide further charges of irresponsibility.

In *JFK* melodrama becomes fused with documentary as the film references well-known actual events about those events in the focus of the New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's (Kevin Costner) fight against powerful and corrupt forces of social control. A whole set of family structures backgrounds Garrison's investigation on the Kennedy assassination. Namely the seed that grows into the investigation takes root also in Garrison's family room: his work plays against his wife, his children and their home life. Furthermore, his investigation can be considered as the function of a more figurative family, the group of assistants who collaborate in the investigative task. When the film shows Garrison with his team, they are often in "family" circle configurations, grouped around a table at a restaurant or in a living room, with the figurative father Garrison at the head. The implicit family context of Garrison's work is a secondary melodramatic configuration compared to the work itself. Garrison is launching nothing less than a search for order within a social system that the investigation finds is far more chaotic and destructive than surface appearance suggests.

⁹³ Lipkin (1994), p. 377.

JFK is a film with a well-defined mission: the need to bring to public knowledge its view of this conspiracy with its enormous and ongoing issues guaranteeing the film's production.

While *Schindler's List* tells its audience about Oskar Schindler, *JFK* is not "about" *JFK* or even his death so much as it is "about" Jim Garrison. Unlike the first film, *JFK* does not bring a particular point of view to generally accepted facts about known events; instead it attempts to build on the known to argue its theory. The film is a re-creation of several speculative and controversial works.

JFK raises ethical issues when particular depictions make the film fall into a critical distortion of "known" history, which is the result from the effort to support its "guarantees" (the Garrison view is valuable to the film's audience and society in general) and inevitably compromise the film's entire argument. Nevertheless, it is quite clear how *JFK* overwhelms the audience with its interplay between actual and re-created materials. Stone combines the Zapruder film of the assassination and other archival footage with "simulated documentary material"⁹⁴ on Super-8, 16 mm and video. The staged footage is designed to resemble newsreel footage and the Zapruder film. Thus, as stated by Carl Plantinga, "*JFK* mixes the footage in a jumbled collage that makes it impossible for the typical viewer to discriminate between re-enactments and archival material"⁹⁵. In other words, the systematic and nearly indistinguishable interplay of real and re-enacted footage ultimately confuses what is real and what is fictional: "Objections [...] of sometimes shot-by-shot interplay of re-created and actual material have centered on the potential to mistake document for docudrama"⁹⁶. Nevertheless, that is an issue which, generally speaking, few authors are interested in; a widespread attitude seems to be that "craft" and "deceit" are justified means in order to

⁹⁴ Paget (1998), p. 73.

⁹⁵ Plantinga (1997), p. 23.

⁹⁶ Lipkin (1994), p. 379.

achieve their proposed ends. Consider the worrisome attitude of filmmaker David Wolper:

One of the programs we did was *The Plot to Murder Hitler*. In order to tell our story, we re-created scenes with Hitler to fill in where film on Hitler didn't exist. Shot in black and white and with a few scratches on it, the scenes looked exactly like the real Hitler footage [...]. The *New York Times* reviewer said it was a dangerous film precedent. He couldn't tell the real Hitler scenes from the scenes that we had done. [...] We had done our job so well he couldn't tell the difference.⁹⁷

More importantly, *JFK* continually mixes the assertion of historical fact with dramatic embellishment and what Stone freely admits is speculation. *JFK* begins much like a traditional documentary, with voice-over narration introducing shots of Eisenhower warning the audience about the powerful military-industrial complex, then moving to a brief history of the Kennedy presidency, accompanied by the relevant archival material. The film then subtly begins to incorporate scenes, beginning with black and white footage of a woman dumped from a car and her warning that "They are going to kill Kennedy" to characters in a New Orleans bar viewing news footage of the actual assassination. Thus the film initially establishes a framework for the assertion of truth claims (typical of nonfiction films), and gradually incorporates the stagings and re-enactments more common to documentary drama and fiction films.

Just as the audience might wonder which footage is staged and which is actual archival footage, neither is the viewer sure what to take as hypothetical speculations and what to take as truth claims. This ambiguity is mirrored in what Stone himself has said about the film and about his intentions in making it; Stone claims that he intends the film to function as counter-myth rather than an account of the literal historical truth. Only a small

⁹⁷ Wolper (1998), p. 286. See also my interview, reported in the appendix, to the Italian documentarist Giovanni Piperno.

percentage of the American people believe the hypotheses of the Warren Commission, that Kennedy was shot by a lone assassin, Oswald. Nonetheless, this has been the official government version of the Kennedy's assassination. In suggesting that JFK serves as counter-myth, Stone implies that his myth, although on the same speculative level as the Warren report, is more politically useful. In substituting one myth for another, Stone hoped to encourage people to question authority and to be more suspicious of secret right-wing operations in the government⁹⁸. However, other evidence implies that Stone means the audience to take his film as more than myth-making, and close to a literal historical account. Although Stone freely admits that the film contains speculations, he nonetheless hired researchers to find as much evidence as possible to back up his assertions.

In sum, concerns over *JFK's* ethics understandably stem from its choice of *subject* (does Jim Garrison's conspiracy deserve to be told?) as well as its *methods* of re-creation (when does re-creation stop and imaginative speculation begin?). The interplay between *indexical* and *indexically iconic* materials in *JFK* takes to an extreme the mix of structures characteristic of documentary drama as a mode of representation: "documentary subject matter and material appear embedded within a fiction narrative, communicated within a fiction feature film context (including theatrical distribution and exhibition); also the fusion of documentary and narrative stylistics has rhetorical objective easily confused with a literal claim to historical truth"⁹⁹.

Nevertheless, the question remains about the effects of such ambiguous or non-existent indexing on the audience. Speculations range from pessimistic point of views to the claim that this kind of film will create *alert viewers* because its structure mirrors the complexities of the search for historical truth. As documentary drama has multiplied on cinema's and television's screens, so have the questions proliferated about its form. Gradually more

⁹⁸ Plantinga (1997), p. 23.

⁹⁹ Lipkin (1994), pp. 379-380.

attention has been paid to the blurring of boundaries between documentary, documentary drama and actuality issues; one of the most interesting and possibly frightening phenomenon. The point is that in this postmodern age, such intermixtures have become increasingly common. And that to the detriment of the audience's need for clearly recognisable boundaries on whether to hold an assertive or fictive stance, or at least when hold one or another *within* the same film. It is thus possible to notice how, in this respect, documentary drama is opposed to the dramatised documentary, in which fictional and factual segments are made clearly distinguishable, so that the viewer always knows *how* to behave, *what* to believe and *where* be entertained.

12. Embodiment of facts: archival footage vs. re-enactments

Documentary evidence refers the audience to the world and supports arguments made about that world directly. Note that evidence *of* and *from* the historical world may appear in either fiction or documentary film and may have the same existential bond to the world both: in one it supports (mainly) a narrative, in the other it supports (mainly) an argument.

An undisclosed force stems from the way in which documents are used within both dramatised documentary and documentary drama; this causes the ethical/aesthetical problem. "By using documents at all, the author problematises (calls into doubt or question) both the fictional nature of drama and the factual nature of information"¹⁰⁰; he implicitly transgresses the boundaries of a discourse usually held to be antithetical to the dramatic. If documents have been foregrounded or given priority in the drama – as in

¹⁰⁰ Paget (1990), p. 15.

JFK – they will have been “problematized” at least to some extent for an audience. The use of actual documentary material or archival footage is an important and distinctive convention by which both information and authentication are achieved. Such material authenticates a program at the documentary level and connects its visibly to its documentary claims. At a dramatic level, in docu-fiction programs, it rarely disrupts the narrative flow as it provides vital contextualisation. Like captions, documentary material frequently sets the scene in time and place for the unfolding drama¹⁰¹. For instance, Oliver Stone’s *JFK*, after the title credits, opens with a montage of archival footages with voiceover commentary, which is used in order to clearly establish the context in which the following events will take place.

A common question is whether documentary films can represent history not only through archival footages but also by way of re-enactments. Re-enactments – which are “a simulation or facsimile of the world, not decals or imprints of it”¹⁰², but, most of all, they are a subjective simulation – unlike documentary footage are evidences of a different order. Re-enactments were once an accepted convention of documentary representation, but have often been denounced as fabrications in the days of observational cinema¹⁰³; then, more recently, filmmakers resurrected them as a legitimate way to address what is not available for representation in the here and now. Furthermore, re-enactments heighten audience’s emotional relationship with the characters, and they do so by means of narrative, fictional techniques and rhetorical ends. But unlike the written account, the re-enactment lies indexically anchored to a present which is distinct from the past it represents. The image testifies to the use of source material from the present moment, not from the past. This presents the threat of disembodiment; the camera records those we see on screen with indexical fidelity, but these figures are also ghosts or simulacra of others who have already performed their parts. As observed by

¹⁰¹ Paget (1998), p. 69.

¹⁰² Nichols (1991), p. 158.

¹⁰³ Observational cinema: documentary form typical of the sixties, which managed to eschew commentary and observe things as they happen.

Nichols: “the indexical image authenticates testimony now about what happened then”¹⁰⁴. Documentary runs some risk of credibility in re-enacting an event since, as observed by Nichols, “the special indexical bond between image and historical referent is ruptured”¹⁰⁵. In a re-enactment the bond is still between the image and something that occurred in front of the camera, but what occurred occurred *for* the camera. It has the status of an imaginary event, however tightly based on historical fact. But in what ways is a re-enactment less authentic than a recounting? In a typical recounting, the audience hears someone describe an event that has long since happened while the viewer sees “authentic” archival footage of the event itself. Does this strategy not confer greater truth-value on the spoken word than it deserves? After all, the spoken word is also a re-enactment of its own right, an interpretation aided by retrospective view and motivated by an implicit point of view shaped over time. By avoiding re-enactments, the use of interviews to recount events together with archival footage avoids the problem of a “body too many”, namely that of an actor. When an actor “reincarnates” a historical personage, the actor’s presence testifies to a gap between the text and the life to which it refers. It reduces representation to simulation. Instead, historical documentaries that rely on archival footage are faced with a “body too few”, lacking both actors and the historical figure (because of the lack of the historical person, who is either deceased or no longer the person he used to be)¹⁰⁶. The Docu-fiction film, and in particular the dramatised documentary, causes to converge documentary authenticity and fictional identification. It is possible to argue that in this form the “extra” body of the actor mediates the viewer’s access to the historical event; techniques of lighting, composition, costume, décor, mise-en-scène and acting style offer an alternative mode of entry and present a different, sometimes conflicting, set of criteria of authenticity for the viewer.

¹⁰⁴ Nichols (1994), p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Nichols (1991), p. 21.

¹⁰⁶ Nichols (1991), p. 249-250.

Nevertheless, representing people's subjectivity, perspective and perceptions is not a simple matter of offering the audience a kind of "likeness", of acting "substitutes" who propose to convey these qualities to the viewer. Thus, archival footage has to be considered only as a partial, though valuable, solution to these issues of representation.

Furthermore, the reliance on testimony and commentary by witnesses and experts that usually parallels archival footage also raises problems of belief or credibility. Audience's willingness to agree with what is said relies to a large extent on rhetorical persuasion and documentary convention. But it is possible to argue that what "social actors" say may as easily be fiction as historically authentic. Exemplary is *The Thin Blue Line's* case: it adopts a fairly strategy regarding the authenticity of both witnesses and re-enactments. The film uses re-enactments less to authenticate the past than to stress the variability of its interpretation. *The Thin Blue Line* eschews archival footage, either factual or fictitious; instead, it uses re-enactments of events surrounding the murder of a Dallas policeman and the subsequent arrest and conviction of the wrong man (Randall Adams). *The Thin Blue Line* finds alternatives to archival footage partly because no documentary footage of the crime existed, partly because even if it did exist, it would not reveal what author Errol Morris wants most to reveal: the subjective processes by which people construct a history that corresponds to present needs; and the subjective and nightmarish experience of being considered guilty of a crime one did not commit.

Morris' film detaches itself from the prevailing reliance of documentary on authentic images. Instead of actual proofs (as real images of the murder weapon, the crime itself, etc.) the filmmaker resorts to typical or stereotypical images of a crime and its prosecution: "murder weapon", "police interrogation", etc. appear in evocative more than "authentic" forms. The audience sees stylised re-enactments and illustrations of the kind found in dictionaries. Morris offers these iconic representations rather than authentic footage of the actual objects and events: "such generalised images remind the viewer of the degree to which his perception of the real is constructed for

him by codes and conventions”¹⁰⁷. In this way, by moving from the register of “authentic” to the one of “generally typical”, the author creates a minor dissonance that upsets audience’s usual assumptions about the historical authenticity of what it sees.

In addition, *The Thin Blue Line* represents for the viewer the historical figure of Randall Adams as he was imagined or seen by others. Adams’ figure, the stereotype of criminal, is represented not by distorting what Adams says or does, but by representing what others imagine he said and did. Morris allows the audience to see how “criminality” is constructed by and historically motivated subjectivity. For each person who describes what happened at the scene of the crime, there is a different re-enactment: “Truth exists for Morris because lies exist; if lies are to be exposed, truths must be strategically deployed against them”¹⁰⁸. Morris demonstrates that a documentary need not guarantee that a re-enactment presents the official version of what really happened. Re-enactment in this film offers a view of how memory and desire are historically situated and subjectively motivated, even in a process of legal justice.

The Thin Blue Line represents a paradigm of docu-fiction’s essence: the subjectivity not only of the author’s unavoidable (de)construction practice, expressing a view of *the* world; but also of the social actors’ perceptions, remembrances and depictions who compose (almost) every documentary film. And the most valuable feature emerging from this form is that it is made – in a sort of “ethical burst” – clearly aware to the viewer.

¹⁰⁷ Nichols (1993), p. 179.

¹⁰⁸ Williams (1998), p. 385.

13. Future perspectives

The blending between the conventions of documentary and fiction film, and the public debates caused by these convergences and contaminations, remain central to fully understand the practices and the roles played by cinema and in particular by television in contemporary society.

The most likely future scenario for docu-fiction programs is of adaptation to the new technologies and their repercussion on practices of consume. Changes in patterns of television broadcasting are progressively occurring as a result of digital, cable and satellite technology; furthermore, the shift from *broadcasting* to *narrowcasting*¹⁰⁹ is steadily getting on. Nevertheless, consumers greater choice, in which niche marketing of programs is a stock-in-trade, will not necessarily mean the complete elimination of mixed programming on national networks designed for large and collective audiences. If docu-fiction programs are constrained to fit into narrowcast programming, there will be obvious problems: as an occasional form, it is not strong enough to sustain its own cable outlet, so would presumably be placed with either documentary companies (like Discovery, Planète, etc.) or entertainment ones (like Canal+, Tele+, etc.).

The factual back-up to the dramatised documentary and documentary drama is a highly untapped resource. In other words, the factual base to such programs, especially if linked to public issues, constitutes a resource that is potentially exploitable by means of interactive television and computer technology. New technologies could fill the well-renowned lacuna of make the viewer possible to check the effective authenticity bolstered by documentary and docu-fiction films. Actually, in the rare cases in which it is done, authors rely on signposting, which clearly indicate the source of authority for what is happening on the screen; an alternative might be a form

¹⁰⁹ Cable or satellite transmission of programs confined to the interests of a specific group of viewers, subscribers, or listeners, such as physicians, businesspeople, or teenagers.

of filmic “footnotes” to go with the credits. But these are all aesthetically uncomfortable means of authenticity granting.

New possibilities might lie in the development of interactive television and by the Internet. Factual material would then be available for the kind of close attention that critics sometimes claim is impossible when a drama is in progress. It might also be possible for an audience, via their television or computer terminal, to enter post-transmission debates and campaigns more directly and more wisely than is possible in the kinds of ritualistic exchanges that take place in the phone-in discussion programs, which would provide a further thorough examination of the “extra-testual” .

For a future wired audience the Internet and digital supports like the Digital Video Disk¹¹⁰ (DVD) may offer possibilities which allow it to take a real supervision on the quality of the content, to deepen specific issues or questions raised during the program, or, if viewers found themselves sufficiently engaged by a program, to join in a public debate. Expectations should be put in the possibility that the audience could take, if desired, an active role: they might through such technology access the facts used by the research team, having in this way the opportunity to verify the sources and the documents on which the program grants its authority. Exemplary is the support given by the Internet to Errol Morris’ *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter Jr.* (1999). The related site¹¹¹ offers not only references to the documents on which the documentary film is based, but provides also further information on the actual Holocaust revisionism controversy and lets the viewers express their opinions and discuss among them. The use of the Internet is becoming always more intense and seriously considered not only as a means of promoting the product, but also to let accessible all that kind of information excluded by the other media and by the film itself. Unfortunately, factual based films designed for theatrical screenings and for traditional television will only have the Internet to fulfil their “new obligations” toward the

¹¹⁰ Also called *Digital Versatile Disk*.

¹¹¹ <http://www.mrdeath.net>

audience. But as soon as they approach on their next life cycle – as the DVD home video distribution – and as soon as new-technologies-in-the-home will allow interactive dynamics, factual based programs will have the moral and ethical responsibility to make this techno-informative synergy not only possible, but also to let it become part both of the producers' deontological code and the audience's rights.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to approach the subject as to give a clear overview of its possibilities and problematics. It is clear, however, that there are still a number of essential docu-fiction topics which merit further exploration. The most serious of these omissions, which various authors refer to en passant, is the almost complete absence of any meaningful discussion about the docu-fiction audience. The most common criticism of docu-fiction is that the audience will be misguided by it; it fails to understand the difference between fact and fiction; it is being misled with regards to history; its opinions will be shaped by fictitious wishful thinking; in its political understanding it will be deviated; and so on. But do we really have *facts* on which to base this kind of assumptions?

Clearly, there are other two issues which cry out for more research and examination: the first one is the *audience perception*; the second one, *effect and action*. Each one is related to reception theory, a conceptual attempt to understand the position of the audience. Examination of how the audience understands the film would add a new dimension to the debate on whether the work is seen as truth or fiction or a peculiar mixture of both. Work on effect would clarify what docu-fiction does in terms of propaganda and change of attitude .

It would be possible to talk about docu-fiction from a hundred viewpoints. In the end, one has to ask: *Does it really matter, or are we dealing with interesting but abstract academic questions?* Personally, I think docu-fiction, or the branch of it that deals with the basic questions of politics, history, and the social assets, is one of the most interesting things which emerged from

the audiovisual media. A corollary of this statement is that only once the issues of the form are clarified it will become evident how docu-fiction can best work, both as entertainment and educational means for the general good of society.

The real challenge then may be the one to determine what docu-fiction should be doing and how it could bring about positive social change. The dramatised documentary will go on telling stories that cannot be told by conventional methods, and focusing on the major questions that concern all of us. On the other side, documentary drama will probably continue to have, as its main commercial object, the one to entertain and to provide exiting and sensational stories for a mass public. Nevertheless, the audience will probably continue to accept the best of documentary drama as being an important force for good. It may grow more aware of its artifice, the means of selection, the biases and the constraints, etc. and all to the good. Very likely, the viewer will continue to see documentary drama as a special genre, a tool that, when used at its best, provides some clear and necessary observation on the world.

With my dissertation I hope to have adequately stressed the epistemological doubt arisen by docu-fiction's practice: this particular form stresses the deformative intervention of the cinematic apparatus in the process of representation. Knowledge is not only "circumscribed" but also subject to question. Knowledge is placed not only in relation to the filmmaker's physical presence, but also in relation to fundamental issues about the nature of the world, the structure and function of language, the authenticity of documentary sound and image, the difficulties of verification and the status of empirical evidence in Western culture.

To sum up, I hope to have placed in evidence the importance of two of the main questions that I have set during the course of my memoir. In the first place, I wish to have cleared the complexities hidden behind the metagenre docu-fiction; term often used with excessive lightness. The major point to

emphasise is how in docu-fiction programs, fiction is "welcomed" in the documentary realm not only as a kind of complement to the imaginary, but also as a means to make the documentary essay more easily approachable. In other words, to allow the author to clearly express his thesis and his opinion on the subject he is filming and, in this way, to set forth the inescapable subjective nature of his creation. But I hope to have also opened a ray of light on the numerous – and highly interdisciplinary – problematics of historical, sociological, semiotic and philosophical order, connected to the hybridisation dynamics between reality and fiction, facts and artefacts, representation and simulation.

Appendix

1. Interview to Giovanni Piperno ¹¹²

Giovanni Piperno has studied photography for three years at the *Istituto Europeo di Design*. After his graduation he participated to a photography seminar conducted by Leonard Freed (Magnum agency) and worked for a year as a photographer for various Italian newspapers. From 1987 Piperno worked as still photographer, clapper loader and focus puller for Italian and foreign films and commercials with film directors (Terry Gilliam, Martin Scorsese, Nanni Moretti), directors of commercials (Moshe Brakha, Tarsem Dhan and Riccardo Milani), and directors of photography (Rotunno, Spinotti, Seale). In 1997 he ceased his activity as assistant cameraperson in order to dedicate himself to short films, documentaries and “docu-fiction” films.

Secondo la tua esperienza nella docu-fiction si tratta di “finzionalizzare” il documentario oppure di “documentarizzare” una finzione? Non so. Forse né l'uno né l'altro, nel senso che noi, senza la telecamera, già abbiamo una maschera, quindi vedere nella nostra vita quello che è finzione e quello che non lo è diventa difficile. Quando c'è la telecamera questa maschera potrebbe diventare anche tre, quattro volte più spessa. Quindi non è un fatto di trovare etichette o categorie.

¹¹² Bardonecchia, 13 July 2000.

È quindi lecito parlare di “docu-fiction”? Sì è lecito. Nel senso che è solo un’etichetta per sintetizzare un concetto che poi non esiste. Limitante come tutte le altre etichette. Forse nessun documentario è “puro” – non mi interessa neanche sapere fino a che punto lo è o non lo è. Trovo interessante quanto fatto da Robert Kramer, che utilizzava attori calati in situazioni reali e assolutamente veridiche. Federico Fellini, a suo modo, è un grande documentarista; utilizzava mezzi e costruzioni folli, ma che erano in realtà utilizzati per raccontare. Fellini ha fatto un film su sé stesso, *l’Intervista*¹¹³, che è un documentario proprio puro, anche se interamente messo in scena.

Secondo te l’intercalare di segmenti di realtà a segmenti di finzione è considerabile come una forma di presa di coscienza della soggettività del proprio sguardo, e quindi come una questione di onestà intellettuale? Può darsi, sì. Ma non è un problema che mi sono posto. Tempo fa, ho fatto un lavoro per le scuole sull’Olocausto. Un lavoro difficile, perché divertire – tra virgolette - i liceali a vedersi 28 minuti sulla deportazione degli ebrei, era un compito non tanto semplice. Il rischio era di fare una cosa pallosa, retorica, che non li colpiva dove doveva colpirli. In questo documentario ho mischiato pezzi di repertorio della seconda guerra mondiale e film di finzione sull’argomento – tra cui anche *Schindler’s List*¹¹⁴ di Spielberg, che ha dato i diritti gratis perché il film era per le scuole. Qualcuno ha storto un po’ il naso per il fatto che noi abbiamo mischiato fiction al documentario: *Schindler’s List* era fatto talmente bene che quando posto, per pochi secondi, di fianco ai filmati di repertorio lo spettatore poteva non vedere dove iniziava l’uno e finiva l’altro.

Non lo trovi pericoloso questo? E’ quello che mi hanno detto. Secondo me no, nel senso che quando Hitchcock [Spielberg?, ndr] è andato a girare nei

¹¹³ Italy, 1987.

¹¹⁴ Usa, 1993.

campi di concentrazione non era uno qualsiasi. Egli aveva scelto cosa inquadrare, era uno sguardo su una cosa che comunque ognuno poteva vedere in maniera diversa. Quindi non cambia molto quanto si abbia ricostruito, l'importante è che, una volta deciso cosa voler "far passare", quindi cosa è vero di quella tragica esperienza, tutti i mezzi per comunicarlo sono buoni.

Un po' machiavellico ... Sì, certo, ma in senso positivo. Non mi interessa tutta la teoria che c'è prima: se è più o meno onesto, ... Niente è onesto. Al momento in cui fai una fotografia hai già fatto un'operazione che è una scelta di cosa mostrare. E' onesto per te, ma per un altro può essere disonesto mostrare quella cosa piuttosto che un'altra.

Il mercato italiano come si comporta nei confronti di questo prodotto ibrido? Siamo talmente indietro ... anche se c'è un'eccezione, quel ragazzo che ha fatto quel film sugli immigrati [*Terra di mezzo*¹¹⁵, ndr]: Matteo Garrone. Egli è l'unico che è riuscito in qualche modo ad avere una piccola distribuzione per dei film che sono per l'appunto delle docu-fiction dichiarate. Quindi nonostante si sia indietro esistono comunque delle aperture ...

Da parte delle televisioni non c'è la richiesta di avere dei limiti, tra finzione e realtà, ben definiti? Siamo troppo indietro qua per parlare di questo. In Italia non ci sono neanche i documentari ... Forse in Francia le televisioni potrebbero fare dei problemi, perché hanno uno stile preciso. Potrebbero quindi dire perché [nei film di docu-fiction, ndr] qui è così e qua cosà ... Questo perché magari hanno in mente solo un certo tipo di documentario, per cui tu devi toccare solo quel tipo e al broadcaster non interessa nient'altro. Personalmente mi sembra che in Italia neppure sanno quale sia la differenza tra il documentario e la docu-fiction.

¹¹⁵ Italy, 1996.

2. *Résumé of the Interview to Villi Hermann* ¹¹⁶

Swiss filmmaker Villi Hermann studied at the London Film School and worked for the Swiss television. He started with documentary films, in which he often used documentary and fiction elements. *Matlosa* (1981) was his first fiction film, for which he is both director and producer. Until now Hermann directed a dozen of fiction and documentary films. In 1980 he founded his own film production company: *Imagofilm Lugano*.

Quello che può spingere ad usare elementi caratteristici della fiction e del documentario, fondendoli in un'unica forma, è data dalle esigenze comunicative del cineasta. A seconda del momento e dei personali obiettivi può scegliere di affidarsi alla fiction, al documentario, oppure di fare ricorso ad entrambi per raggiungere i propri fini. Nell'utilizzare questa forma ibrida c'è però anche la precisa intenzione di creare una certa "confusione" nello spettatore. Una confusione che lo porti a riflettere sulle problematiche di cui si cerca di renderlo partecipe. In altre parole, facendolo andare "avanti" ed "indietro", facendolo continuamente muovere tra eventi ricostruiti, palesemente messi in scena e segmenti di interviste o di impronta più tradizionalmente documentaristica, si vuole che lo spettatore stesso si ponga in modo "problematico" e attivo rispetto a quanto gli viene comunicato. Si potrebbe quasi affermare che sia la confusione stessa il mezzo di decodifica attraverso il quale si compie il rapporto autore-spettatore.

Per quanto concerne il pericolo di manipolazione o di fraintendimento che lo spettatore potrebbe potenzialmente correre, e quindi dell'eccessiva confusione che potrebbe venire a crearsi nella sua mente, questo non è da considerarsi come un pericolo. Se le cose sono rese chiaramente percepibili

¹¹⁶ Lugano, 29 August 2000.

e distinguibili egli ha sempre la possibilità e la capacità di decodificare correttamente il messaggio che si vuole far passare. In questo senso il fine giustifica i mezzi, è lecito cioè utilizzare sia la fiction che il documentario per raggiungere il proprio obiettivo comunicativo.

La docu-fiction non è certo un genere nuovo, tant'è che il primo autore che fuse fiction e documentario fu Robert Flaherty con *Nanook of the North*. Questo è stato in un certo senso il primo vero film di docu-fiction della storia, in cui venivano ricreati e messi in scena eventi e situazioni che non stavano "accadendo" in modo spontaneo. Diviene quindi evidente come la problematica fiction-nonfiction sia in realtà anch'essa relativa, visto che sin dalle origini è stata caratteristica quasi imprescindibile del "mestiere".

La stessa distinzione tra cinema documentario e cinema di finzione è in un certo senso arbitraria. Entrambi sono frutto di scelte da parte del cineasta: di punti di vista, tempi, tagli, etc. Si seleziona in continuazione, e selezionando si giunge a creare in ogni caso qualcosa di "costruito". Qualcosa che non può che essere la manifestazione della soggettività del cineasta ed ulteriore dimostrazione di quanto quel vecchio ideale dell'"obiettività" sia irragionevole, nient'altro che una chimera. In questo senso il cinema di docu-fiction potrebbe anche essere considerato come un ulteriore manifestazione della presa di coscienza da parte del cineasta dell'assoluta soggettività a cui non può, e non deve, sfuggire.

Un problema che sta diventando sempre più serio (e meno sentito?) è quello dello statuto e della qualità del "documento". Cos'è realmente un documento? Fino a che punto lo possiamo cioè considerare "originale", e non manipolato? Sembra che non si sappia più quale sia il vero senso che investe questa parola. Anche *Schindler's List* viene definito "documento", ma in realtà è una fiction, non un "testo" storico. Il soggetto certo lo è, ma non ha alcun valore documentario in sé. Bisogna quindi porsi in modo critico di fronte a quello che viene passato anche come vero documento storico. C'è la

necessità di potere (e dovere) andare sempre alla fonte di quanto viene genericamente considerato come documento storico. Una volta che ci si propone di farlo si è però confrontati anche con l'enorme difficoltà di poter rintracciare la "fonte originaria" che ne garantisce la "assoluta" autenticità di quanto viene comunemente considerato un documento.

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