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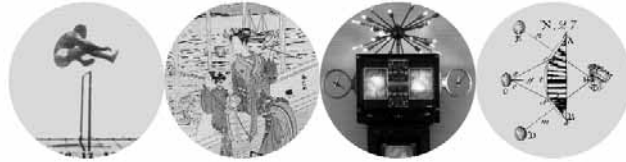
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## The Terrain of the Long Take

Laura Kissel

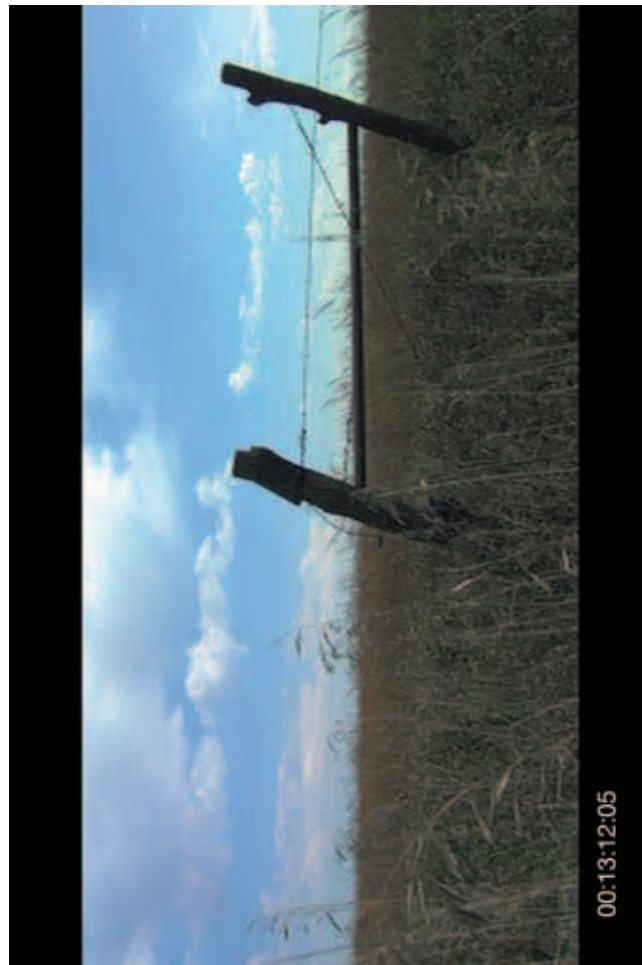
### Abstract

This autobiographical essay examines my inclination towards the use of the long take in documentary film and video. I discuss how my documentary practice is dominated by the take in duration; the ways in which I use the time of the frame to draw closer, in an intuitive way, to the profilmic; and how the long take makes visible the complexities of living through the representation of landscape, space, and time. I describe the process of framing my subject, what the long take signifies in the moment of its capture, as well as what the duration of my frame might express to an audience in search of meaning. I also consider the possibility that the long take is an autobiographical impulse, derived from the experience of inhabiting a landscape that is itself both time and space.

### Keywords

Roland Barthes • André Bazin • Henri Bergson • documentary film and video • duration • frame • intuition • landscape • long take • observation

But, to the artist who creates a picture by drawing it from the depths of his soul, time is no longer an accessory; it is not an interval that may be lengthened or shortened without the content being altered. The duration of his work is part and parcel of his work. To contract or to dilate it would be to modify both the psychical evolution that fills it and the invention which is its goal. The time taken up by the invention, is one with the invention itself. It is the progress of a thought which is changing in the degree and measure that it is taking form. It is a vital process, something like the ripening of an idea. (Bergson, 1998[1911]: 340)



The long take has become the terra incognita of the modern documentary film, a blank space in a practice that devotes itself almost entirely to other properties of the shot. And this is contrary to its heritage, for documentary was born in the pleasure of watching such ordinary events as leaves shimmering on a tree or a train arriving at a station. (MacDougall, 1998: 209)

## Definition

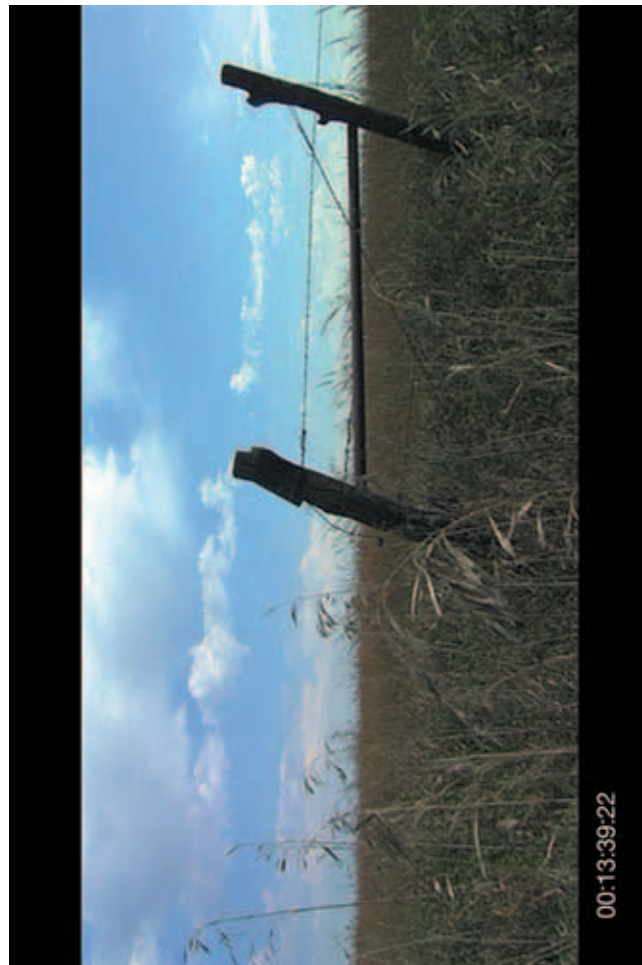
**Sequence Shot:** A long, usually complex shot, often including complicated camera movements and action. Also called 'Plan-sequence' (the French term), or Long Take. (Monaco, 1999)

The tripod and camera are set – or I am standing with camera in hand – in a singular, unchanging position before the subject, anticipating the action that will take place. I frame and the camera records what I am waiting for, which is the variable of change.

In my practice of non-fiction filmmaking, the long take is a process of discovery, enabled by the duration of the frame. It is a way to move closer to the possibility of uncovering the essence and significance of things, a gesture towards clarity. The long take enables a certain kind of intelligibility that is different from an answer. It resists constructing a singular meaning to what is before the camera; instead, the long take is expansive. I pull the camera's trigger or press a button and the take begins: in tandem with the camera, I inhabit the time of the shot. Minutes accumulate as the camera records, its frame dynamic in the squaring of the image. The take ends when I release the trigger or depress the record button a second time. The time in-between the beginning and end of the take extends an opportunity for greater awareness of the subject at hand; it affords time for a mutual exchange between myself and my subject and, by extension, the spectator. The practice of capturing a long take sometimes feels like an investigation or experiment – the possibility for deeper knowledge. It is a way to order the phenomena of the world: a means to enter into the structuring of chaos and complexity; a means to assimilate information, both visual and socio-political. Within the time of the frame, everyday things become visible and one is offered a moment to linger on a question rather than pursue a particular answer. The long take is the condition of possibility for drawing closer, in a sympathetic way, to that which is before the camera.

## Inhabiting the Time of the Frame

There is an urge behind my non-fiction work – perhaps, too, it is the fulcrum of the long take – to make what is obscured, discernible, to bring what is mostly marginalized to the center of attention. I am drawn to Dziga Vertov's concept of the Kino-Eye: 'that which the eye doesn't see' without the aid of



a camera. For Vertov, the camera inspires ‘the possibility of seeing without limits’ and ‘of making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt, the acted nonacted; making falsehood into truth’ (Michelson, 1985: 41). Vertov’s Kino-Eye is all seeing, all knowing, even more reliable than human experience. Though I am inspired by Vertov to ‘see without limits’ (p. 41), I want to look in an expansive way. The camera enables me to *notice*, to contemplate my relationship to the world. I reject the ‘all-knowing’ eye,<sup>1</sup> in favor of camera work that draws out an experience – that heightens my own (and the audience’s) connection to and awareness of the subject at hand. It is labor that is done with the body and the hand, but also with the heart and the mind.

Camerawork is a means to prompt interrelation; it is intelligence work driven by intuition, an ability to remain in relation to that which is unfolding. I endeavor to find the essence of the moment in front of me by responding with my physical body and my mind. Camera work is the foregrounding of insight, the application of intelligence to feeling. It is, as Agnes Varda (2000) says onscreen in her documentary *The Gleaners and I*, ‘filming with one hand what the other is doing’; that is, filming while relating, and embodying the moment of the making of the image. Varda’s small camera leads her intuitively, through a maze of social and political landscapes, to discover the contemporary manifestations of gleaning. While making the documentary, she discovers that her camera is also gleaning, gathering images and experiences that prompt her to relate, through her camera, to the work of others.

The camera, its frame, and the time of filming combine in the practice of the long take to enable visibility and privilege the act of looking, the moment of observation. In documentary theory, the camera operator is often described as the wielder of power,<sup>2</sup> as someone with the authority to construct a scene that more often than not narrowly or falsely interprets the subject, silences him or her, or constructs the subject in the filmmaker’s own image.<sup>3</sup> But my way of inhabiting the moment of filming is informed by something other than the prerogative to record. My way of looking is intuitively driven by an ethics of engagement, a sympathetic awareness of larger forces at work in the complex networking of the political, economic, social, and cultural registers of living. I use a camera to attempt a connection to someone or something across and through a maze of social and political conditions. To foreground sympathy and intuition while recording is to express concern, in the mind and *through the camera*, for an individual’s circumstances in the face of extraordinary conditions – poverty, racism, or injustice of various kinds. I frame and shoot at length to enable these complexities to be seen.

The duration of a take elucidates external conditions by foregrounding *spatial* conditions – a socially construed environment, the political landscape and the individual or thing that exists in the middle of what is larger than itself. The philosopher Henri Bergson (2005[1913]) describes space as ‘an external world, quite distinct from ourselves, in the perception of which all minds have a common share, [and which] foreshadows and prepares the way for

social life' (p. 236) And yet, 'space' within the frame of the long take is something other, something more; insofar as the long take and, more precisely, the time it takes to unfold allows the subject to be seen in context. Duration, and our attention to it through a framed landscape, makes visible circumstances that exert more power and authority over the subject than a camera (i.e. as simply a technology of representation) ever could.

In an age of rapid cutting, duration is palpable, almost like a silence, a meditation, an open space we are unaccustomed to. The long take is like a pause; it expands and contracts through the frame, as if it is a breath deeply drawn and slowly released. In this way, the long take instinctively marks a moment in the time of a space (i.e. a place of happening), providing it with an edge and a proportion, and the possibility of being assessed. Bergson provides a way of thinking about this when he describes *real duration* as 'made up of moments inside one another' (p. 232): that is, unfolding action in the time of a landscape (and its image) allows us to see these moments as interconnected, as permeating one another. Duration creates a total impression (which is not arrested from multiple movements or actions) and which allows for a response, or a blossoming of insight. In writing about the time of hearing the sounding of bells, Bergson writes of such blossoming:

The sounds of a bell certainly reach me one after the other; but one of two alternatives must be true. Either I retain each of these successive sensations in order to combine it with the others and form a group which reminds me of an air or rhythm which I know: in that case I do not count the sounds, I limit myself to gathering, so to speak, the qualitative impression produced by the whole series. (p. 86)

As with Bergson's bells, the reception of duration through the camera's frame at the time of recording enables an assimilation of the complexities before me, a divining of interconnected possibilities, instead of a singular impression or meaning.

As the long take invites us to engage with a socially construed spatial landscape, it also foregrounds *shared* time, a continuous moment spent in relationship to what is taking place and to the person(s) in front of and behind the camera. It is a heightened interval that draws our attention to:

- the presence of the camera
- the act of recording
- my presence, in a place where I would not normally be
- an awareness of my looking towards a person or a thing
- and that person's recognition of receiving my gaze in all these ways.

In the time that elapses, we share the immediacy of the landscape. In the field where we work (with camera or machine) we – my subject and I – feel the heat of a hot summer's day while the camera is held between us for hours at a time. With camera in hand, I am bending, stooping, running to catch up, imitating my subject's movement across the field. My work to frame and

record is an effort to capture the patterns and movement of my subject who is working: stopping, bending, examining details, moving forward and across the field before me. He labors and so do I, though differently; it is time and landscape – and the time of the landscape – that we share.

Duration encourages *attentiveness*, a sensibility that is shared across production and reception, from the camera person and subject to the audience.

Standing under the hot sun, one subject speaks in long paragraphs, without pause, about the nature of his work and its myriad details. It is his manner of relating to me, camera rolling in hand. I don't interrupt the flow of words or rearrange the gestures that my subject is making; I want them to continue, to embrace actions and words in the moment of their utterance (whether I agree with them or not), to respond intuitively or with my own voice to the action as it unfolds. *I am listening*.

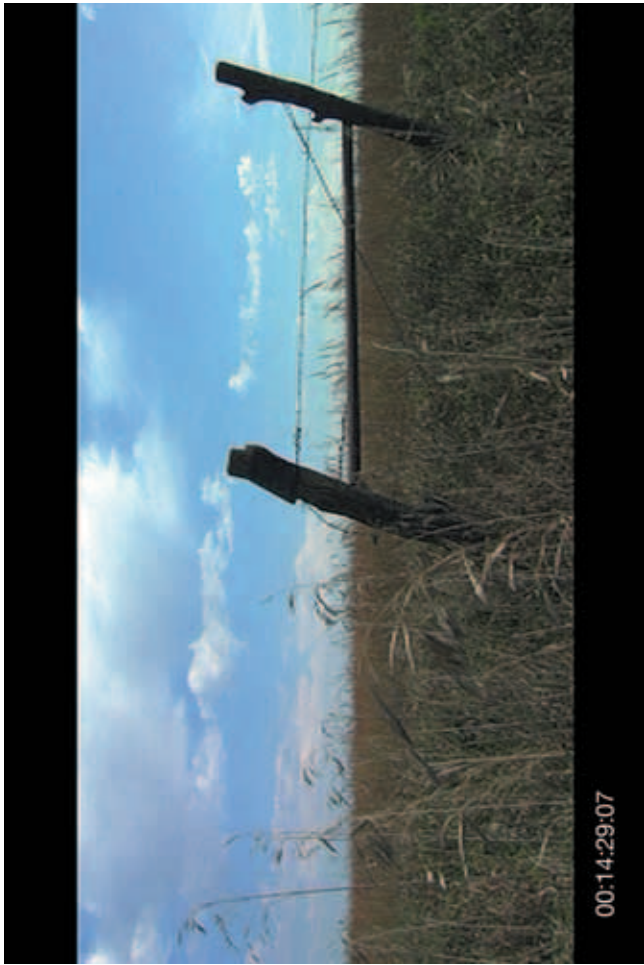
Another subject barely speaks, and in this moment I am aware while recording – and he is aware while being recorded – of his silence. The camera makes a record of these continuous lapses of time and he anticipates that he should be giving something up to it, but either he is a man of few words, or he is nervous and shy, or he wonders what I am doing here, alongside him. His way of being prompts me to record in duration: *I am listening*. The time of my frame enables me to see him thinking, his skillful handling of the machine, the rhythm of the everyday movements he makes in the cab of the tractor back and forth, down and up 1,700 acres of a cotton field over and over again. We share the time of the making of the image.

The practice of filming, and of the long take in particular, brings me into relationship with the physical world. To move around an object or within an action in order to make a record, which will later *re-present* the object or experience, allows me to reside in closer communion with that which is before the camera. The act of reframing in order to capture a thing, a person, or an action allows me to study it more closely; the frame allows me to see it anew. André Bazin (1971) has described camerawork with an inclination towards the style of the newsreel as retaining a 'human' quality – 'a projection of hand and eye, almost a living part of the operator, instantly in tune with his awareness' (p. 33). Without a camera in hand, I would participate less, I would observe more objectively, with separation and remove. With a camera – and in relation to the time of framing and reframing – I move beyond mere witnessing of an action into a subjective position; I generate a participatory and instinctive response to the action, which becomes the take.

## Thinking through the Frame

The long take arrests a moment in time and places it in a frame which, taken by itself, is a kind of statement, a stanza written in memory of the captured moment. In other words, the take is not analogous to a singular word in





isolation; rather, it gestures towards the sentence. The long take becomes a meandering phrase that embodies what the resulting image enables us to see and to sense in addition to time and space: the element of change. The long take in particular embodies these attributes because the duration of the take allows meaning to emerge and for there to be time enough to grasp it – even if the meaning(s) that surface(s) are multiple and contradictory. The long take is like a search through the action for an essence, for possible intentions, as it unfolds in time.

A scene that unfolds through the duration of the fixed frame affords an expansive and multifaceted subject to become more *recognizable*. At the same time, the long take resists arriving at a singular interpretation. The perception of duration is an awareness that asks for a response to that which is before us, whether barely noticeable or clearly articulated in the frame. The longer a take is held, the greater potential there is for a nuanced reading of the subject at hand. The long take constructs and enables meaning *through* duration by creating an open space within which meaning(s) can emerge. It enables ideas and impressions to rise to the surface where they can be transformed, both by the image maker and the spectator.

There is the tendency to cut, in editing, to reduce the duration of the long take. In his assessment of duration, Bazin notes that montage tends towards the ‘anticinematic’ and that ‘essential cinema is to be found in straight-forward photographic respect for the unity of space’ (p. 46). ‘It is simply a question of respect for the spatial unity of an event at the moment when to split it up would change it from something real into something imaginary’ (p. 50). Like Bazin, I am interested in the take itself, the moment of the making of the image, the moment during which the decision to define a beginning and an end to image capture emerges. The moment is filled by sensibilities and motivations that result in the content and form of the take.

What determines the right aesthetic position for acquisition of the long take – and how is that decision made? This question and others arise internally, subtly, almost as if they were not asked, but felt. What is placed in the frame and what is left just beyond, merely hinted at? I work – my body works – in communion with, in concern with, the environment of the frame. Will the camera move during the take, or remain still? There is a maneuvering through these subjective questions and related decisions in the midst of an internal, full quiet. With a camera as a conduit between me and the subject, I am in a heightened state of awareness, fully engaged in the action through the edges of a frame, which arouses a visceral response. Observing with a participatory eye, I intuitively know where and when to move, how to frame and reframe. The time of framing (before the take) is an active moment, a time for the ordering of information, bodies, things; it is a time of anticipation, of projecting forward into a possible future based on gesture and movement. The frame allows me to expect an outcome, to participate in what may happen. What takes place internally is not unlike Barthes’ (1981) description of his role as a spectator of photography; it is an emotional response, provoked by the image I am framing as I endeavor to recognize it

more deeply, in time: 'I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think' (p. 21).<sup>4</sup>

The long take can both simplify and complicate our understanding of the subject it frames, in part because the long take is simultaneously static and changing. The frame may never yield even as the action within the frame is often in constant motion. In his writing on the long take in ethnographic film, David MacDougall (1998) notes: 'Longer takes are also likely to be complex entities, creating problems of intellectual focus. They characteristically contain ambiguities, interruptions, and competing centers of attention' (p. 220). Rather than something that confuses, the long take affords the camera person (and later, the spectator) an opportunity to assimilate visual information according to her own way of seeing and to take the time to consider the heterogeneity of what is represented. The viewer's eye may wander from foreground to background, from person to person, from an active element in the frame to an area that is in stasis. In this way, viewers are placed in the position of working their way through complexities, of noticing layers of movement and gesture that allow for the expansion of meaning. The long take asks us to remain open to what is portrayed, to receive information and assimilate it at the same time. To cut away would be to direct the audience to a particular way of seeing, to a singular analysis; to remain in duration is to ask the audience to participate in the building of meaning, to be in dialogue with the idea(s) that emerge through the frame.

The duration of a long take also enables the consideration of ordinariness in detail. My inclination towards the long take derives in part from being drawn to everyday things that often go unnoticed. The long take affords what is neglected to become the center of attention. My proclivity towards the long take also has to do with the pleasures of looking, and the desire for an aesthetic order and symmetry of a kind that is felt, embodied. I long for the expansive sense that duration affords, which leads me to believe that my tendency towards the long take is autobiographical.

### The Sky, the Land. The Sky, the Land<sup>5</sup>

I am on a dusty gravel road in Franklin County, Kansas. The landscape is familiar to me – a swath of wide open sky suspended overhead; below, the cascading texture of grass, as far as the eye can see. A fence runs in a straight line from here to the horizon; in-between are softly rolling hills, the occasional tree, defined patterns of green and brown, and the spring earth, upturned. With no inclination to meander, the road ahead of me cuts through the landscape as a deliberate wound, the white gravel of its surface reflecting bright as snow. On either side of the road tall spring grass softens an edge where gravel turns to dust; beyond, the land undulates down and up, and then other fences appear. Dusty green hills stretch to the horizon. Many might say of this scene that it is an empty landscape, lacking movement and human interference. But I see upturned earth that gestures towards labor and activity; I feel the intense rhythm of vertical lines running counter

to the horizon, punctuating the earth with wood and wire in a deliberate attempt to create disciplined order. This cadence of visual and material intervention is further arranged when I turn the camera onto this scene and begin to order this already measured landscape.

*the sky, the land*

What is it to live in relation to an expanding horizon line, to remain indiscernible, somewhere between a great sweep of sky and the land underneath? There is a link for me between this landscape and my inclination towards the long take and it is located in the various desires this place stirs in me: the longing for an expanded view and an uncluttered perspective. The search for geometry – surface, line, and a point. The desire for aesthetic order. This place is so large and open it obscures almost everything, including me. It is as if the land itself is looking and has caught me in its expansive gaze. I endeavor to look back, and so I frame.

*the sky, the land*

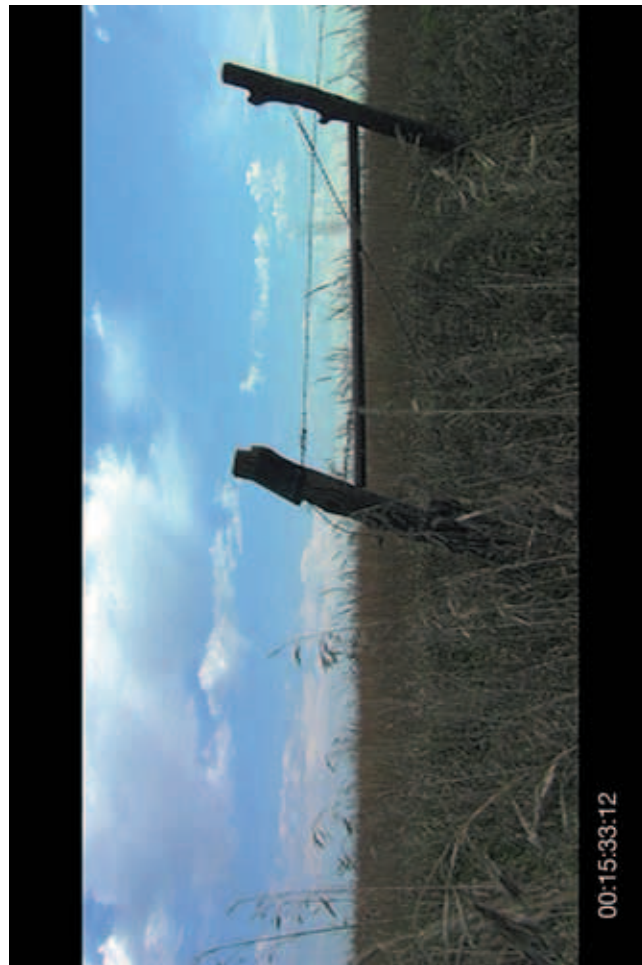
What is the relationship between sky and screen, between an ever-expanding horizon and the border of my camera's frame? The sky is limitless and the screen limits; the sky is palpable and the screen imagines a world. It is time they both share. The frame bounds the vastness of this scene, but it does not hinder it. In my field of view, it moves. What changes in the sky and on the land can be written on the screen, in duration. I begin the take.

*the sky, the land*

Duration feels like a response to the largeness and changeability of this environment, a way to return the gaze of a landscape that is monumental, enigmatic, and changing. It is possible that this prairie, like the long take, embraces both time and space; its immensity and expansiveness are constantly moving, changing, ever outward, towards an endless horizon.

## Notes

1. The development of documentary form has been driven by a desire to acquire knowledge about the subject. From travel films to ethnography to Cinema Vérité, the documentary camera works to create the impression of privileged, unfettered access to information. Documentary's 'all-knowing' eye is a camera that does not reveal the filmmaker's presence or measure it as a crucial story element; it provides a sense that what is captured by the camera is the blatant work of objectivity and fact. It cultivates the idea that, if you had been there, you, too, would have witnessed the subject as it is represented. This impression is also enabled by formal conventions such as the disembodied voice over, continuity editing, and the didactic structure of the expository documentary mode.
2. Shooting film and video images has been described in documentary theory as a kind of violence enacted on the subject.
3. For example, Robert Flaherty intended to provide a portrait of contemporary



Inuit life when he collaborated with his subject 'Nanook', but instead Flaherty recorded what existed in his imagination, a romanticized image of how his subject may have lived years before he encountered Western culture and the white man. Flaherty saw what he wanted to see and used the camera to manifest his own desires. For an analysis of the ways that history, ethnography and ideology can be read through *Nanook of the North*, see Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996).

4. Barthes' 'I' is an awareness of how photography works on him in a personal and direct way. Though I am aware of the image's work on me, on how it makes me feel, I do not uphold this subjective understanding as more important than the feeling of shared intuition, of *being in relation* to what is in front of me. Even so, Barthes' writing about photography formulates for me the most articulate discussion of subjectivity, meaning, and social relationships as they pertain to the image.
5. Laurie Anderson (dir.) *Homeland* (2008). Performance in Charleston, SC, 5 June 2008.

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