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## The Role of Habits in Documentary Filmmaking and in the Recognition of Documentary Works

CLAUDIA TOSI  
claudia.tox@libero.it

**Abstract.** It is generally agreed that documentary refers to reality. I argue that documentary is the cinematic form that elevates human beings' experience with reality to an artistic level, and that the documentary work may be conceived as a proxy of the perceiver's existential experience. Habitual practices related to recognizing authentic reality and its constraints underlie the filmmaker's commitment to not violating it, and behaviors exhibited accordingly inform practices. Habits, such as seeing the past through pictures and asking questions to understand other people's thought, have creatively evolved into cinematic techniques such as the use of filmic or photographic archives and interviews. The habit of deferring to experts for genre categorization determines that, due to their authority, the acceptance of challenging works facilitates genre transformation. A better understanding of processes that engage human beings with existence may help to comprehend documentary filmmaking practices, and vice versa.

**Keywords.** Documentary, art, existential habits, authenticity, perception.

## 1. *Introduction: documentary in between art and truth*

In 2010, the Guardian released an article in which the documentary was portrayed as a custodian of truth:

In years where filmmakers are suspicious of the mainstream media [...] they are increasingly turning towards documentary as a way to make sense of the world they live in [...] and eager for a form that talks to them about real events in a real way. [...] People are looking for bigger truths about the way we live now, truths they are not getting from Hollywood or the traditional media but from documentary works. (O'Hagan [2010])

While *post-truth* policies have poisoned the political and public debate (in 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary chose to designate *post-truth* as the Word of the Year) (Wang [2016]), documentary is experiencing its golden era, and it is interpreted as an antidote to mainstream forms of communication, which subordinate the truth to a secondary position. However, Tabitha Jackson, former director of Sundance Documentary Film Program, emphasizes that truth in documentary is «a truth, not *the* truth», and highlights that documentary *is* a form of art (Jackson [2022]). During the last 60 years, documentary filmmaking has established its success, leading to a proliferation of documentary film festivals that attract a vast number of viewers and facilitate the distribution of documentary works in movie theaters. Just to mention the largest venue in Europe, in 2022, the International Documentary Film Festival of Amsterdam (IDFA) welcomed more than 240.000 visitors<sup>1</sup>. Notably, in 2014, the documentary film *the Look of Silence* by Joshua Oppenheimer<sup>2</sup> was selected for the International Competition (traditionally including fiction films) at the 71st Venice International Film Festival and was awarded several prizes. Moreover, in the last two editions of Berlinale (in 2023 and 2024) the films awarded with the Golden Bear were documentary works although competing in a category generally including fiction films. Theorists and philosophers such as Bazin, Deleuze and Cavell, while not having developed a specific theory of documentary, place documentary within the broader tradition of cinematic art. They emphasize the significance of cinematic techniques not only for achieving artistic purposes but also for attaining realism, even in documentary filmmaking. Bazin, the French film critic held the view that cinema, among other arts, satisfies our obsession for realism in its very essence. The camera automatically reproduces reality without human intervention and establishes a direct relation between the filmic image and the object depicted by virtue of its indexical character. However, this alone does not suffice, as the indexicality of the filmic image, at most, allows to attain documentary value, which is not the aim of cinema, as, according to Bazin, cinema can never be separated from imagination (1958: 135). Only the mastery in *translating* the departing material – whether it be from the real world, a theatrical play, a literary novel –

into a cinematic work through proper cinematic techniques enables the attainment of realism, which, to a certain extent, can be intended as fidelity. The duration of shots, the type of cutting utilized, the rhythm established through cutting allow the filmmaker to create a world analogous to the departing material, through fidelity but not imitation. Bazin brought the example of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922)<sup>3</sup>, the first work recognized as a documentary. He highlighted that realism was achieved by means of the mastery in the use of cutting. In the hunting scene, the employment of a sequence shot, which for Bazin is the most effective device for achieving *fidelity* with respect to reality, allowed the author to put emphasis on the most important aspect of Nanook's relation with the animal (the seal): the wait. The truthfulness of the scene resides in Flaherty's ability to convey a specific true meaning (the wait) through a proper (artistic) technique (1958: 78). Gilles Deleuze portrayed cinema as the ultimate medium for the manifestation of reality as it is, in its continuous flux, liberated from the static impression given by the limitation of human perception, often bound to subject-object relation. The world of cinema is a construction whose relationship with the external world is not underpinned by the mimetic principle. Realism is attained through the embodiment of the dynamics of reality, constituted by a specific environment and human types inserted in that world, through cinematic techniques. This applies to documentary filmmaking, as well. According to Deleuze, in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, the reenactments employed and the mastery in cutting allow to capture the duel of forces between the individuated external world to which Nanook belongs and the protagonists, enabling new situations to emerge. The use of the action-image, characterized for focusing on movement and action within the frame, allows Flaherty's movie to capture the *tête-à-tête* of the protagonists with their specific environment, their fight to survive. The film embodies an existential conflict and, whether the story imitates the external world or not, its realism is the product of a cinematic construction based on narrative coherence and effective cinematic techniques which capture the conflict between forces enabling the individuation of life in potentiality. Realism can include fiction, the fantastic, and it determined both the triumph of American cinema and the origin of documentary (Deleuze [1983]: 141-142). Stanley Cavell highlighted the phenomenological component of viewing which involves the audience. As cinema is a public art, Cavell pointed out the author's responsibility regarding the meaning attached to filmic works. However, publicness is a shared responsibility, thus we are all responsible for the works we share, and the problem arises most explicitly in documentary filmmaking (Cavell [1971]: 126-127). He implicitly addresses a range of issues from the filmmaker's ethical standpoint to the assertibility of documentary filmmaking, without really offering solutions. Considering that also fictional movies can convey truths to a certain extent (Friend [2017]: 34-35), it is legit to pose questions regarding the type of truth

presented in documentary films, and their comparative character in relation to fiction. Philosophers within the analytic tradition, such as Gregory Currie, Trevor Ponech, Alvin Plantinga and Noël Carroll endeavored to define the nature of documentary from the perspective of philosophy of language. They focused on intentionality and on the propositional content of the work to justify the assertibility of documentary and draw a divide between fiction and documentary. In general, they define documentary by the author's intention that the audience entertains the work as true, where the emphasis is on the truth value of the propositional content, almost completely neglecting the artistic component of documentary filmmaking. These philosophers share the assumption that documentary is a sub-category of non-fiction, in contrast with fiction, where fiction is conceived as an invitation for imagining or make-believe, while non-fiction is understood as an invitation to believe. Some differences characterize their views. Currie endeavors to shed light on John Grierson's initial definition of documentary, created in the early '30s. The Scottish producer and film critic described documentary as a «creative treatment of actuality» (1932-1934: 19), acknowledging its clumsiness as a definition. In the attempt to *preserve* truth, Currie grounds his view on the indexicality of filming image as an essential element. He conceives a documentary film as one in which the preponderance of images has the representational function of traces (documentary units), although allowing that the whole film may contain parts which are *about* the subject of the narrative, but not traces of it (1999: 291). Noël Carroll substitutes «documentary» with a new concept, «films of presumptive assertion», to provide an accurate definition for an extension of objects which coincide with what scholars have in mind when they refer to a work as documentary (1997: 173). He adopts the Gricean-type of intention-response model of communication (1997: 181) and attributes the author the responsibility for the standards of evidence applicable to the content of the work. Alvin Carl Plantinga proposes to consider the notion of «asserted veridical representation», a conception which bestows both a central, but not essential, role to assertion, and a fundamental function to images used as traces of the subject. A criterium which his account requires to be satisfied is that the relevant portion of the propositional content of a documentary is existing or has existed, since viewers expect from documentary that it is a reliable record or account of the actual world (Plantinga [2005]: 111-113). Several actual works universally recognized as documentary can function as counterexamples for these accounts. For instance, the Oscar nominated documentary film directed by Bartek Konopka, *Rabbit à la Berlin*, tells «the true story of the Berlin Wall, through the eyes of rabbits»<sup>4</sup>. Rabbits trapped between the Berlin Walls for 28 years represent metaphorically what occurred to Eastern Europe before and after the collapse of communism<sup>5</sup>. The intention of the author is to overtly interpret the story of the trapped rabbits as a metaphor of historical transformations in

Eastern Europe. Even though the audience can grasp the propositional content of the work and the metaphorical implicatures, standards of evidence cannot be applied in this case, since it departs intentionally from the factual for artistic purposes. Trevor Ponech endeavors to encompass artistic purposes and chooses a pragmatic point of view. He conceives documentary as a *cinematic assertion*, where the audio-visual components of the movie need not be fully factual, hence what it depicts needs neither to be existing, nor determined by conventions or norms related to objectivity (Ponech [1997]: 203-205). A cinematic work, according to Ponech, can be referred to as a documentary if and only if its author intends the work to be a documentary. While preserving the author's freedom, Ponech's account lacks discriminatory force, as also an accurate biographical or historical fiction film might count as a *cinematic assertion*, to a certain extent. Quoting Kendall Walton, it appears that speech act accounts suffer from the «have theory will travel» syndrome, which is the tendency of theorists to apply an old theory they love to deal with a new problem (1990: 76). Audio-visual images are rich in contents, allowing the viewer to grasp more than propositional contents, thus speech act theories may not be suitable for the task. In my view, Grierson's initial definition, which serves as a seminal point of reference for documentary practitioners, can prove highly effective in understanding the nature of documentary filmmaking, particularly when approached from a phenomenological perspective, notwithstanding its lack of analytical depth. From this standpoint, Grierson's conception seems to describe documentary as a proxy of the ordinary observer's experience with reality. This may elucidate why, despite the absence of a universally agreed-upon definition of documentary, documentary production persists, and viewers' appreciation may not be homogeneous. The widely held belief that documentary represents reality in a truthful manner leads individuals to automatically assume their phenomenal experience with reality as a point of reference. As this experience is characterized by the limitations due to an external world resistant to our control, viewers expect that documentary works do not violate reality constraints. Habitual practices and resulting behaviors that enable us to inhabit the world constitute the grounds for our phenomenal experience with reality and contribute to the aesthetic experience with documentary works. In what follows, I will endeavor to explain my argument.

## *2. Documentary filmmaking and the habitual practice of authenticating reality*

John Grierson's definition of documentary is based on two pillars: i) in the first place, the cinematic form is conceived as art. The documentary filmmaker is not a scientist. Rather they are poets, committed to the environment which they portray with an artistic approach, making poetry by observing a

reality not easily transformable into art (slums, factories, streets, cities...); they make art out of observing reality through narrative components and commitment with observed people; ii) secondly, the filmic material is captured on the spot where the story happens, after a full immersion of years in the environment, among *originals*, and narratively organized as a drama. Documentary works are considered *truer than Hollywood films* since their narrative structures are derived from reality and not borrowed from literature or theater as it usually happens in Hollywood films, thus more apt at narrating contemporary life, albeit within an artistic framework (Grierson [1932-1934]: 21-25).

Grierson opposes the actual world of real people depicted in documentary films to the artificial, and *malleable*, world of Hollywood movies built for the sake of the camera through props and actors. Newsreels, journalistic essays, lectures, and scientific works are ruled out from the category, along with experimental movies without a narrative structure, as lacking an artistic approach. Grierson identified the embodiment of this *new and vital art form* in Flaherty's practice, while also acknowledging his attraction to exotism and romanticism. In initial times, documentary and ethnography shared their origins to a certain extent. Indeed, Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) is widely regarded as the first documentary film, as well as the first ethnographic film. As an ethnographer, Flaherty *immersed in reality* and captured *natural material of real people in real places*, which Grierson referred to as *originals*. As a documentary filmmaker, he creatively interpreted reality through reenactments and a narrative structure fulfilling subjective purposes. Notably, before Flaherty, in 1898, three years after Lumière filmed their shorts, professor Alfred Cort Haddon, British natural scientist and ethnologist, employed a camera to film the dances of Torres Straits Islander. However, the material had only «documentary value» as it aimed at depicting reality as it was (Banks [1990]: 18). Bill Nichols, film critic and theorist, highlights a *strong impression of authenticity* for documentary films, by virtue of the indexicality of the filmic image. He describes the documentary film as a *representation*, and not a mere reproduction, of the actual world, namely the place that «we already occupy» (2001: 20). Indeed, as the representers do not coincide with the represented, the representation does not deflate into a mere reproduction. While Grierson's description provides a general outline of his conception of *documentary*, analytically, it fails to explain what justifies the assertibility of documentary. Bill Nichols contends that to a certain extent any film could be understood as a documentary, in the sense that any movie captures the cultural background from which it was created and reproduces the appearances of the people who perform within it (2001: 1). Cavell's notion of cinema may offer valuable insights for addressing the issue from a philosophical standpoint. He argues that while painting evokes our subjectivity, rather than the presence of the world in the work, cinema surpasses subject-



tivity by bypassing the act of painting and employing an automatic tool (1971: 23). In my view, the documentary filmmaker's commitment with reality constraints, namely with reality's transcendence with respect to our mind, can be interpreted as a reassertion of our presence within the cinematic image, as our connection with the world is constitutive of the act of documentary filmmaking. Documentary filmmaking represent *reality as it is* by adopting the perspective of ordinary perceiver. While our actions and perception are bound by the constraints of reality, the documentary filmmaker regards these limitations as inviolable, and adopts subjective approaches to represent the world, whether internal or external, spanning from the maximum subjective to the maximum objective approach. Documentary filmmaking may be conceived as the art which embodies the experience of human beings in existence. In philosophy of perception, it is commonly agreed that humans are conscious and intentional being, that they have mental states and that they represent what is going on in the world. An individual might not be able to articulate *how it is like* to be *immersed in reality*, namely what it means to have this or that phenomenal experience such as seeing a red object or perceiving oneself as an individual among others, or to justify their perceptual beliefs regarding the external world. However, the recognition that we are living in an actual world whose objects have certain features, and that this implies constraints (primary physical) is a pre-condition for most of our behaviors. Typically, this recognition entails habitual practices exhibited unwarily. In general, people who are acting by mere habits are described as individuals who do something automatically, without critical thinking, vigilance, or careful consideration. Habitual practices are characterized by the repetition of identical performances (Ryle [1949]: 30). Much like the actions of walking, playing piano, standing, buttoning and unbuttoning – activities which may initially be prompted by an intention, but are later performed seemingly unconsciously (James [1950]: 5) – the recognition of actual reality is often unconscious, enabling our minds to focus on conscious activities. These habits are contingent upon sensory stimulation and the extents of *traces* left by such repetitive stimuli. In broad terms, sensory stimulation from the external world activates nerve-centers, which can either follow old pathways or forge new ones. This process determines whether a behavior becomes so ingrained to be exhibited unconsciously. This applies also to complex habits, which are essentially interconnected habits having a determined outcome (James [1950]: 107). Whatever theory of reality one might endorse, in standard conditions, a human being perceives to be an existing individual surrounded by existing objects, in a real world which cannot be controlled by our mind. In other words, we are inhabitants of a non-amendable, or mind-independent, world. We do not need to comprehend the concept of mind-independence to recognize that physical reality cannot be altered by thought alone. Think of how difficult it is to teach a child to stand and walk and how long it takes to the child to be eventually unconscious of the effort. In the meanwhile, they will

have learnt that the more the surface under their feet is solid the easier is to stand and walk, but also that the more hurtful will be to fall. Even without understanding the physical properties of solids, or knowing the concept of gravity, children instinctively learn how to interact with surfaces to minimize discomfort and soon the result will be that they will reduce conscious attention when performing the act of walking, unless some danger would catch their attention. The acknowledgment of the mind-independence of reality serves as a precondition for walking and arises as the outcome of the physical interaction between the child and the environment. This acquired habit, or complex of habits, namely *traces* on our brain of a habitually repeated state, enables us in the future to perform the same state in analogous circumstances. The earlier habits are formed, the more they seem spontaneous, innate and enduring, becoming integral part of our lifelong behavior (James [1950]: 236-237). The cooperation between organism and environment is a condition for acquiring habits: walking involves legs as well as the ground, speaking to someone implies physical air, vocal organs and some audience with a functioning hearing apparatus (Dewey [1922]: 14). Perception is involved largely. Leaving aside disagreements concerning the contents of perception – a longstanding philosophical debate about the properties of objects such as colors, tastes, and sounds, and whether to attribute them to objects themselves or to our sensations, dates back to at least to 17<sup>th</sup> century – our perceptual experience within an existing reality that transcends our mind is a pre-condition for our actions. By endorsing a Fregean representationalist perspective, some controversies can be overcome, and some phenomenal experiences can be immediately justified by perception. Chalmers, for instance, posits that some contents, such as colors, can be conceived as Fregean contents, namely as conditions on extension, different modes of presentations referring to the same concept (Hesperus and Phosphorus are different modes of presentation of the planet Venus). Therefore, a phenomenal experience corresponds to a certain mode of presentation (redness, for example) of a determined property, or of a set of properties, regardless of whether they are conceptual or nonconceptual (Chalmers [2004]: 22-23). This applies also to demonstratives, as Thompson maintains that also spatial and temporal experiences can be handled as Fregean contents (2003: 149-153). Thus, when I say, «this yellow lemon», provided that it is a genuine object-seeing experience, perception can immediately justify my phenomenal experience. Peacocke's notion of «minimal objectivity» can support this view. It maintains that there is a core class of contents, such as spatial matters of the kind of size, shape, distance, orientation, or temporal matters such as temporal order, temporal intervals, and others, which are caused by what they are *as of*, provided that the subject is embedded in the world in a proper way and that their sensory apparatus functions properly (2009: 792-793). While there is no agreement on whether these contents are conceptual or nonconceptual, some phenomenal experiences can be immediately justified and can «objectively» be



shared by other individuals. The property of being mind-independent – or *non-amendable*, or *non-malleable* – is constitutive of a physical reality about which one may say «it exists», and according to which one exhibits a certain behavior. From an ontological perspective, I intend for «non-amendability» that property of reality according to which it cannot be modified by conceptual schemes. For example, I might know, or not know, that water is referred to as H<sub>2</sub>O, however, if I dive into water, I get wet, and thinking that hydrogen and oxygen as such are not wet does not help me not to get wet. In other words, I cannot amend what is in front of me in experience by using my conceptual schemes or mere thought (Ferraris [2012]: 48). Although one might not have a concept for it, or might not be aware of it, the subject's ability to respond automatically to the mind-independence of the external world is a pre-condition for many other habits and can determine survival. For instance, after experiencing a burn from touching fire, one will refrain from touching it again rather than hoping for a different outcome. Once acquired the habit not to touch fire, individuals will exhibit the same response each time they are near fire. These sorts of experiences reveal the external world as a physical environment which imposes limitations to different extents or presents dangers. In this sense, reality is not malleable, and since childhood we develop habitual practices to deal with these limitations and dangers to survive them. Recognizing the existence of the external world and its mind-independence corresponds to *authenticating reality*. The observer discerns whether facts occur in real life or in dreams, they ascertain the identity of people or the nature of the occurrence, and they act accordingly. *Authenticity* encodes the expectation of truth. It is a property which is bestowed to «who or «what» is «who» or «what» claims to be (Theodossopoulos [2013]: 339). The truth predicate we use for the original of which a copy, or a reproduction, can be done is *authentic*. Works of art such as paintings or sculptures must be *authentic* to have artistic and economic value. One says, if they have reason to say it: «This is an *authentic* self-portrait of Frida Kahlo». Although a copy of the painting might be a perfect copy, identical in every respect, it can't count as an original (Goodman [1976]: 113). The process of *authenticating* an object is rooted in perception, although it may also involve knowledge, as in the case with works of art or other objects that require more than mere perception. Hegel defines the authentication which occurs in the perceptual experience as the poorest form of truth; it corresponds to «it is», «it exists». *Authenticity* warrants the *authority* of the object and its authentication by means of the bare experience of sense-certainty (Hegel [1807]: 90). The authentication of reality is one of those habitual experiences that one accomplishes automatically and that determines other habits. For instance, in everyday experience, if we want to enter a restaurant and the door is closed, we automatically grasp the handle with a hand and open the door. However, to achieve that, one must first recognize that the door is a genuine one, that it is a physical object, a tridimensional one, that it

exists and, contextually, that physical objects cannot be penetrated by thought alone, nor can a human body attempt to phase through them without risking significant injury. A simple automatic action entails a long chain of habits developed through repetition and often exhibited unconsciously. According to Locke, when we assert that we are seeing a tri-dimensional object, whereas our seeing experience is of a two-dimensional surface with shadows, shape and color, what occurs to us is that judgement intervenes on sensations and «alters appearances into their causes». This is the result of a habitual practice that we develop as we mature once we can exercise judgement. Although it may seem that recognizing tri-dimensionality is solely a matter of sensations, in reality it is the outcome of sensations informed by judgements to some extent (Locke [1690]: 82-85). This is a settled habit as it is performed constantly. Some experimental studies on the perceptual illusion of «pop-out» dots, conducted by psychologists, have emphasized the role of unconscious inferences in certain instances of heuristic decisions-making, where heuristics refer to rules of thumbs for quick problem-solving often based on intuition, past experiences, and common sense. The same bi-dimensional image containing twelve spheres shaded from white to black can present either concave or convex dots when rotated by 180 degrees. In an environment marked with uncertainty, our brain assumes the external world to be tri-dimensional and utilizes factors such as shades, dimensions, shapes, distances to make a good bet regarding the nature and spatial relations of objects. Although these perceptual illusions may be classified as errors, some argue that they are beneficial errors. These *unconscious inferences*, which occur continuously and are learned from individual experience, have contributed to survival, and have facilitated evolutionary learning (Gigerenzer [2008]: 67-68). Once that we have *authenticated* the world surrounding us, we exhibit a certain behavior, based on our previous experiences and on current intentions. For instance, when observing a landscape, we might instinctively remove small objects obstructing our view, or reposition ourselves depending on whether the obstructing object is a tree, a building, or anything which is beyond our control. If we are attending an exhibition and we are observing a photograph of a door of natural size dimension hanging on the wall, we would not try to open the door, as we will have unconsciously inferred that what we are seeing is an image and not an *authentic* door. The habit to recognize the characteristics of the environment in which we operate is a prerequisite for every action and interaction. It is necessary to ascertain the identity of an individual before engaging in any exchange with them. Typically, when we dialogue with a person and we seek to understand their thought, or feeling, we ask them directly, instead of trying to read their thought. We engage in conversations with people rather than with their photographic images since we learn in childhood that photographs do not talk to us. We are taught to ask people, and we do ask, it's a habitual practice for collecting information. However, one is rarely aware that the warrant of statements ex-

pressed in the first-person («I») form can be quite problematic, especially when it comes to feeling and beliefs. There is no agreement regarding the assessment of first-person authority. Ryle compares it to eye-witness authority, Davidson rejects it on the ground that regarding self-ascriptions the subject may not have better evidence than others, as Freud's interpretation of unconscious contents seems to support. Falvey conceives the first-person authority as an interpersonal phenomenon, thus the habit of the reader to take the speaker's avowal at a face value has a constitutive role (Falvey [2000]: 70). Asking questions to comprehend individuals' thoughts and feelings, explaining facts that we have witnessed to people who did not, watching pictures to see the features of people of the past, avoiding a tree while skiing down the mountains, and recognizing that our perspective may not always be optimal when attending events, thereby adjusting our actions accordingly, are habitual practices in our everyday life. But also driving or riding a bike while consciously thinking of events or conversations or reasoning about something are habitual practices. The documentary filmmaker can elevate these practices to an artistic level, such as conducting interviews, utilizing audio-video archive material, reconstructing past events, employing motion devices for filming, capturing observational material, and incorporating commentaries that are not purely descriptive. These techniques are rooted in experience. While in fiction films, poor lighting which determines grainy footage, unsteady camera movements, and limited access to individuals are perceived as mistakes, in documentary works they contribute to suggest that the filmmaker dealt with the constraints of authentic reality. At a perceptual level such *imperfections* implicitly say, «I, the filmmaker, was here, I am a witness, and I did not manipulate reality». Dewey maintains that although we use different terms to designate artistic production and aesthetic appreciation, they have a common root in experience, and that there is continuity between the artistic work and our experience in life (Dewey [1934]: 46). Art has the power to reconnect with the expressivity of things, eliminating the veil of familiarity which covers them (Dewey [1934]: 104). Indeed, whether on the one hand habits are the result of, or allow, significant experiences, on the other they may induce familiarity and indifference, obstructing the expressive potential of objects and experiences. Documentary films, as being representations made by an artistic subjective standpoint, and not mere reproductions, express meanings through the use of cinematic techniques, enabling the viewer to re-signify reality.

### *3. From authenticating reality to recognition and appreciation of documentary works*

According to some, habits may have a determining role in defining who we are. Our ongoing relation with the environment, available technology, and oth-

er individuals modifies our subjectivity. The performance of habitual practices may be understood as available tools for achieving our aims, and their synergy with the environment can allow desire to merge with ideas and manifest into something tangible (Dewey [1922]: 25-26). Established habits automatically stimulate reflective imagination, thus strengthening thought processes, and conceptualization is facilitated as the exhibition of habitual practices enable the mind to be focused on specific intellectual activities, preventing attention from being dispersed (Dewey [1922]: 172-173). Art is one of the possible outcomes of these processes. Dewey conceives art as grounded on habitual practices, wherein the repetition of acquired skills through consistent practice may lead to achievements which should extend beyond mere mastery of technique. The artist, as a skilled and proficient technician, is driven by purpose and thought. Through the continual practice of acquired skills, the artist endeavors to accomplish significant outcomes, such as inspiring individuals to think, take action and change society to improve it. On the contrary, the mechanical performer tends to repeat the same performance as they are more interested in practicing for improving the skill itself (Dewey [1922]: 71-72). Cavell refers to Dewey while drawing a distinction between the artist and the technician (Cavell [1971]: 145). He defines the artist as someone who explores the possibilities of their art, such as cinema, but who are not necessarily devoted to its history as they aspire to create works with innovative structures that break with tradition to a certain extent. Cavell emphasized the artist's continuous questioning, which opposes endeavors of original narrative structures to the artistic tradition of cinema, as the grounds on which evolution is possible (Cavell [1971]: 72-73). The subjective innovative approaches of artists lead to the establishment of new practices and to the creation of new categories, as in the case of Flaherty. However, the artist's practice is the outcome of individual habits developed within the framework of established societal practices, as most of our activities are, as for instance, language learning, which typically occurs within the linguistic norms of a social group (Dewey [1922]: 100). Flaherty was operating within the Hollywood system when he pioneered a new cinematic art form with *Nanook of the North*, few years after cameras were already in use for scientific purposes in ethnography. Bill Nichols maintains that documentary has a historical nature and that during its evolution, six different modes of representation have come into prominence at a given time and place. The availability of new technological possibilities, the change of social context or the response to perceived limitations of previous modes contributed to the evolution. He provided a very influential classification, according to which documentary works can be classified in: Poetic, Expository, Observational, Participatory, Reflexive and Performative (2001: 99-138). However, the response to innovation in terms of aesthetic appreciation may be contentious,

as audiences may not automatically recognize and accept new categories. The Italian poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi attributes to habits the role of enabling generalizations (1817-1832: 209) and considers generalizations to possess a relative character. In his view, the repeated perception of something leads to habituation, thereby establishing it as a standard within its category. Consequently, anything different from the norm is perceived as going against the norm, as a contradiction. However, through repetition leading to habituation, this can potentially become another norm, and simultaneously the subject would refine their judgement and become more objective (1817-1832: 702-714). This may apply to Stacie Friend's view on genres. She conceives the documentary category as a genre embedded to a supra-genre, non-fiction. Her conception grounds on what Walton refers to as «categories of art», which are ways of classifying artworks in relation to medium, art form, style, or others, as relevant aspects for appreciation. Membership to categories is not determined by sufficient and necessary properties, but by a cluster of non-essential features which includes internal and external properties (Friend [2012]: 187), such as perceptual features of the contents, the categorial intention of the author, facts regarding the context of origin, and others. The genre functions as a contrast class against which the properties of the work stand out as standard, contra-standard or variable. Works possessing standard features with respect to the category are included, while those possessing contra-standard features are ruled out (Friend [2012]: 188). Variable features, such as for instance whether the film is in color or black and white, or its length, are irrelevant. In my perspective, individuals' phenomenal experience with reality constraints constitutes a sort of subjective contrast class which contributes to the recognition and appreciation of the work. In broad terms, when the perceptual content of the work suggests that the author has *not amended reality*, representing it without violating its constraints, viewers tend to perceive it as true and, if it aligns with their taste, appreciate it. The abundance of works sharing similar features tend to establish standards, sub-genres, movements or modes of representation. Innovative works employing highly creative solutions, emphasizing the author's subjectivity over the objectivity of the external world, potentially sacrificing the *impression of authenticity* of the work may raise audiences' perplexity. However, whereas viewers' judgement may be negatively influenced, the possible institutional acceptance and recognition of challenging works can impact audience judgement and favor the evolution of the genre. In this regard, I will provide an example. *You Have No Idea How Much I Love You* (2016) is an awarded documentary film by Paweł Łoziński, which premiered at IDFA<sup>6</sup>. The synopsis presents the film as such: «During a mother and daughter's intimately filmed sessions with a psychotherapist, blame, grief and anger gradually make way for reconciliation»<sup>7</sup>. The observational film comprises close-ups shots of

the three protagonists during the psychotherapy session which do not enable the viewer to ascertain whether sessions were conducted either collectively or individually. After the screening, during the Q&A, Łoziński explained that the filming of actual therapy sessions conducted individually was prohibited due to privacy restrictions, therefore the individuals depicted on screen were not the *real* subjects of the case, but rather actresses who shared similar experiences with the actual persons involved. On his defense, the filmmaker added that characters' teardrops were real since they strongly identified themselves with the actual persons of the case, as the analyst reprised some old familial conflicts of theirs. A portion of the audience expressed its discontent, as not everyone was convinced, whereas another segment appreciated the work. Assuming Peirce's framework, which can suit the experience of watching films appropriately, one might object that the perceptual experience with the work cannot justify the authenticity of the depicted facts and individuals. Peirce recognizes three sorts of elements: Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness. For example, the pain of the burn, which he understands as an indexical sign, is an experience of Firstness, it is on the level of sensations. Recognizing it as a «brute fact» and reacting to it is an experience of Secondness, whereas Thirdness is the comparison between multiple experiences of Secondness, allowing objectivity (Banks [1990]: 20). The Firstness of watching a film is completely different from the Firstness of shooting the film. The filmmaker meets *originals* in real places, while the viewer is sitting in a movie theatre, or at home, watching a screen. The viewer experiences a sort of second-hand Secondness. Walton maintains that the photographic image has a transparent character, in the sense that we look at the photograph and we *see* the object *through* it. However, the image does not coincide with the object. We *see* objects and the world *through* photographic and cinematic works, we don't see them directly (Walton [1984]: 246-252). Deleuze references Pasolini's idea that the filmic image is similar to the free indirect discourse, arguing that cinema is not only a direct means of communication but also a way to convey implicitly the viewpoint of someone else (1983: 73). The possible impression of authenticity conveyed by filmic images cannot justify the belief that the state of affairs depicted is authentic. Paraphrasing Roland Barthes on the "reality effect" of realistic literary works (1968: 146-148), that impression is nothing more than an *authenticity effect*. Authenticity is provided at the level of connotation, not at that of denotation. Thus, while the perceptual contents of the filmic work may or may not convey an impression of authenticity, a subsequent body of information may or may not justify our beliefs, and/or appreciation, in one way or another. In the case at hand, the revelation that protagonists were actresses has impacted a significant portion of the audience, as it may have elicited an impression of *inauthenticity*. However, another portion of the audience was not perplexed. In



general, the recognition and the acceptance of documentary works at an institutional level significantly influence viewers' recognition, as they tend to defer to institutional authority regarding the status of the work. However, subjective factors may interfere. According to Dewey, deferring to institutional authority is akin to the habit we acquire in childhood to deferring to adults. While habits tend to be self-reinforcing, when the institution is receptive with respect to novelty, innovation is possible. Indeed, whereas imitating adults' behaviors ingrains established practices in the child, the receptivity of adults to children can elicit renewal. This principle underlies the renovation of societies, institutions, and can allow avoid their stagnation (Dewey [1922]: 100). In the context of cinema, international, national and regional institutions (i.e., public and private funds) involved in the production of cinematic works by virtue of their funding activities have an active role in the accomplishment of the ontological attribution of genre (fiction or documentary or others) through official enactments which usually precede the production phase, namely filming sessions. A film which has met eligibility criteria and received funding is subject to formal and material obligations through contracts, official agreements and other types of treaties and deals, thus genre attribution is definitive. The institutional receptivity to authors' artistic aims – the higher the degree of innovation and artistic quality in the submitted work, the more favorable the evaluation of film funds and film festivals – supports the creation of works which challenge the conventions of the genre, contributing to its evolution. However, subjective factors of ethical or ontological kind, or a perceptual experience eliciting an impression of inauthenticity, may raise disagreements and impact appreciation. From a certain perspective, Łoziński's artistic choice does not violate reality constraints. The author has identified a stereotypical mother-daughter relationship, employing two actresses embodying two different human types, and has given instruction to the therapist to dig into their actual personal experiences. However, from another standpoint, one may argue that the propositional content of the work is false. Nevertheless, the work has continued its successful journey across festivals and in movie theatres, being universally recognized as documentary. Generally speaking, this challenging work may suggest that although there is a consensus that documentary represents reality truthfully, the expectation that documentary assertibility must be justified at a propositional level implies severe limitations to artistic freedom. Instead, interpreting documentary assertibility in terms of the author's commitment not to violate reality constraints, by developing a cinematic language inspired by experience, explains the expectation of truth elicited by documentary works and preserves artistic freedom. In this regard, a better understanding of processes that engage human beings with existence may help to comprehend the artistic and epistemic factors underlying documentary filmmaking and vice-

versa. This prompts reflections on whether philosophy should engage with documentary to understand its potential or to limit artistic freedom for preserving propositional truth.

### Conclusion

While many aspects remain unexplained, the general framework presented documentary as the cinematic form that elevates human beings' experience with reality to an artistic level and the documentary work as a proxy of the perceiver's existential experience. The individual's habitual practice of authenticating reality underpins the filmmaker's commitment to not violate the constraints of reality. Meanwhile, strategies to transcend these limitations inspire the development of cinematic techniques employed in filmmaking. The authority of institutions that promote innovative approaches, combined with the habit to defer to experts on relevant issues, contributes to the evolution of documentary filmmaking practice, making it a promising artistic tool to better understand human nature.

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## Notes

- 1 <https://www.idfa.nl/en/news/35ste-editie-idfa-geopend-met-all-you-see-in-carr%C3%A9-en-35-theaters-in-het-land/>.
- 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bp1xT302VcY>.
- 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkW14Lu1IBO>.
- 4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=miJVBpd0g8E>.
- 5 <https://letterboxd.com/film/rabbit-a-la-berlin/>.
- 6 <https://www.idfa.nl/en/>.
- 7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oII9-HMBjh4>.

