

IMAGES OF THE REAL  
INTRODUCTORY NOTES 1

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“The term ‘documentary’...presupposes that *there is something real to document*”, writes Jean-Louis Comolli in *Cinema against Spectacle*. “[S]ome corner of the world, the reality of a relationship, the singularity of a subject; whatever is still obscure, rough and hoarse in the world...The documentary has an interest in the war of facts and narratives as something real, something which takes place in our world and in our lives.”<sup>1</sup> Documentaries, non-fiction films, filmic essays or, as filmmaker Jill Godmilow prefers to say, edification films,<sup>2</sup> ineluctably confront us with the question of the real. However, what precisely is considered real and how such films relate to it, is much less obvious. On the one hand, the real appears in documentary film as the material, social, and historical reality that constitutes the collective world shared by the filmmaker, the spectators, and the people appearing in the film. As such, it is a concrete matter that imposes certain conditions and limits. For “documentary cinema poses a buttress of the real against the desire to be in command of everything, to reinvent everything...In documentary cinema, death, when filmed, cannot be reversed, repeated or replayed. There is no ‘second take’. The diseased, the wounded, the dead are so forever, even after the camera has stopped filming. This *hors-film* is another name for the real.”<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, however, the real of documentary is also a debatable, uncertain, conflictual territory, in which heterogeneous ways of perceiving, grasping, comprehending and making sense intertwine and constantly challenge each other. How objective reality is apprehended, how the relation between the factual realm, the historical becoming of society, and the multiple mediations through which an object, a detail, a situation, or an event acquires a meaning is grasped – such questions are always, in one way or another, implicitly addressed through documentary film.

The reality exposed by documentary films is also complex in another sense. On the one hand, the images and sounds are, at least most of the time, recorded through technical devices. Hence, they constitute material traces which function as indices in the sense attributed by Charles S. Peirce, because they witness an actual encounter between the camera and the apparent reality. That which is captured by a technical device is substantially different from what is accessible to human perception alone. “For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye,” as Walter Benjamin writes, “‘other’ above all in the sense that a space informed by human

consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious”.<sup>4</sup> The camera thus opens an access to that which Benjamin called an “optical unconscious”<sup>5</sup>, or that which Dziga Vertov attempted to grasp through his notion of a “Kino-Eye”.<sup>6</sup> Which is not to say, however, that such camera recordings provide immediate access to empirical reality. Even without taking into account the advent of the digital, which has profoundly destabilized the evidential force of images,<sup>7</sup> the process of filming and editing subjects the reality that appears in front of the camera to multiple alterations. No film encompasses the totality of the reality at stake; there is always much that remains omitted, ineluctably out of frame, out of focus, *hors-champ*. Consequently, film images and sounds transform the reality that appears during the seizure: through the process of filming, fragments of the real are fixed in a moment of their past, extracted from their context, cut into segments, reduced in size, translated into a two-dimensional format or into pixels, before they are repositioned and reworked during the editing process. However little the intentional intervention of the filmmaker, the respective reality is always affected, somehow or other, by the technical device that records it, just as it is always shaped by the artistic, political, and intellectual choices of those who conceive, direct, and produce the film. The ways the fragments of the real are selected and framed, how the visual and audible material is assembled, combined, contextualized, or processed through montage – all these mediations ineluctably convert an apparent reality into a film that orients the perception and charges it with particular layers of meaning. Therefore, films constitute a reality of their own and, to say it with the words of Trinh T. Min-ha, “[t]o deny the reality of film in claiming (to capture) reality is to stay ‘in ideology’ – that is, to indulge in the (deliberate or not) confusion of filmic with phenomenal reality.”<sup>8</sup>

Already John Grierson, who is said to have coined the term,<sup>9</sup> had understood documentary as something other than merely an accurate recording of empirical reality. While he argued that the realness of represented objects, people, and events played an important role in the effects produced by the film, he nevertheless considered the direct connection between the filmed material and the reality it seized as necessary though insufficient condition for the comprehension of the particular potential of those films that he understood as documentaries in the truest sense of the word. Grierson’s point was not so much that an immediate reproduction of the real was impossible. But the mere depiction of empirical reality was, at best, of minor interest to him. Hence, he distinguished documentaries from “plain (or fancy) descriptions of natural material” as to be found, for example, in “peacetime newsreel” or purely informative journalistic formats which “describe, and even expose, but, in any aesthetic sense, only rarely reveal.”<sup>10</sup> Documentary film, by contrast, is for Grierson the “creative treatment of actuality”, as his famous definition of documentary goes.<sup>11</sup> Through artistic means, underlying layers of sense are laid bare and compellingly exposed, thereby

inducing “a philosophic attitude on the part of the spectator”, as he notes with regards to Flaherty’s *Moana*.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely because documentaries are not solely based on neutral camera recordings of apparently objective reality, but produced through the encounter between this reality and an artistic subject who aesthetically mediates it, that they are able to unfold a hitherto concealed truth-content of the real.

But what exactly does it mean to treat actuality creatively? Wherein lies the particular agency of images and sounds that address the real directly? How can the particular tension between the real and its filmic expression, between objective reality and the mediations through which it appears in a documentary, be conceptually grasped? What concept of the real is implicitly or explicitly mobilized in documentary filmmaking and the thinking about reality it generates?

### REALITY, WHAT REALITY?

For Grierson and his followers, the answer to the question of the reality to be addressed through documentary film was at least clear. At stake was the concrete social reality as it is actually constituted. He thought that compelling representations of social problems, disasters, or humanitarian crises would not only draw attention to lived conditions in need of improvement, but could also steer public opinion towards political reform, social justice, and the stabilization of democracy. Grierson, who followed a Hegelian model of the State apparatus as a rational agent for harmonizing social unity, defended the idea that social crisis could and should be solved through the intervention of strong political institutions.<sup>13</sup> Documentary, therefore, played the important role of a “corrective social agency”, as Jonathan Kahana puts it.<sup>14</sup> In other words, documentary was first and foremost a potent medium of communication, which should be put in the service of public education. Hence, the particular value of documentary film lays for him in its transformative force: since that which is exposed through a documentary film is based on reality itself, and since this reality directly concerns viewers, ethical and political injunctions arise inevitably out of this mode of representation. Accordingly, Grierson presumed that the perception of reality was an inherently political concern – and that documentaries were capable of guiding it in a responsible way when put in the service of the right cause.

Throughout its history, this idea of documentary film as a means for raising and negotiating social issues has been an important motor for its development. Documentary has been considered a powerful tool for propagandistic endeavors and has been instrumentalized for the transmission of educational, ideological, and moralistic messages from above. Yet, it has also been a privileged form of expression for artists, independent filmmakers, and activists, who used it to contest

hegemonic claims and discriminatory practices, and the denunciation of authoritarian, misguided, and illegitimate uses of the medium and the information it conveys. By dint of its demonstrative potency, documentary has thus appealed – and continues to appeal – to those in power and their critics alike.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, many documentary films ostensibly refrain from adopting a discernable stance, at least a stance other than the “assertive stance” that characterizes them, according to Carl Plantinga, as documentary.<sup>16</sup> Rather than considering “the war of facts and narratives as something real”, as Comolli puts it above, they take reality as a coherent given. By alleging to present reality simply ‘as it really is’, seemingly impartial documentaries tacitly postulate a general consensus about the constitution of this reality. This does not only concern the concrete details of the reality they expose, but also – maybe even more importantly – the forms, figures, and concepts employed for their mediation. Often, such documentaries base their claim of the realistic apprehension of reality on a double assumption. First, that authentic audiovisual material would provide a straightforward access to the reality at stake. Second, that the complementary consolidation through established facts and rational explanations would supply a comprehensive contextualization based on reliable information. What is presupposed is not only that technically produced images provide accurate representations, but also a certain uncritically adopted conception of reality. The latter is understood as comprising two distinguishable spheres: the objective realm, constituted by cold facts, on the one hand; and the sphere of subjectivity, which is understood as everything concerning sense perception, sensitivities, opinions, and social tendencies, on the other. However, rather than being as self-evident a conception as it is often presented, this positivistic approach to reality is anything but devoid of questionable premises. In particular, the critical tradition of philosophy has persistently problematized its theoretical shortages and alignments with the dominant power structures. Max Horkheimer, for example, criticized such positivistic positions for failing to grasp their own multifold entanglements with the society from which they pretend to be independent. Instead of neutrally analyzing so-called given facts, they (re)produce a prevalent pattern of capitalism. “[M]odern science, as positivists understand it, refers essentially to statements about facts, and therefore presupposes the reification of life in general and of perception in particular”, Horkheimer writes in *Eclipse of Reason*. “It looks upon the world as a world of facts and things, and fails to connect the transformation of the world into facts and things with the social process. The very concept of ‘fact’ is a product—a product of social alienation; in it, the abstract object of exchange is conceived as a model for all objects of experience in the given category. The task of critical reflection is not merely to understand the various facts in their historical development...but also to see through the notion of fact itself, in its development and therefore in its relativity. The

so-called facts ascertained by quantitative methods, which the positivists are inclined to regard as the only scientific ones, are often surface phenomena that obscure rather than disclose the underlying reality.”<sup>17</sup>

The very idea of the factual as self-explanatory evidence and the concomitant concept of objectivity as quantifiable, measurable empirical reality, are historically developed, controversial conceptions that are intrinsically tied to a specific power structure of society. They presuppose and constantly reiterate the capitalistic principle of the division of labor and the generalized process of reification, and entail the depreciation of everything that does not fit into their frame as dubious, biased and subjective. Hence, the positivistic approach to objectivity dogmatically poses the conditions for knowledge production to the detriment of divergent conceptions of reality, and disregards the antagonisms inherent to its own conception. In his critique of the predominance of positivistic rationality, Adorno goes as far as to note that “[t]he notions of subjective and objective have been completely reversed. Objective means the non-controversial aspect of things, their unquestioned impression, the façade made up of classified data, that is, the subjective; and they call subjective anything which breaches that façade, engages the specific experience of a matter, casts off all ready-made judgements and substitutes relatedness to the object for the majority consensus of those who do not even look at it, let alone think about it – that is, the objective.”<sup>18</sup> What is more, such an idea of the factual as the major criterium for the determination of the real, which presents itself as disinterested and neutral, is far from immune against actual distortion even within its own premises. As Jacques Rancière writes, “Negationists have already shown that to deny what has happened, it isn’t necessary to deny fact after fact: denying the links that run through them and give them the weight of history is enough.”<sup>19</sup> The idea of factual reality as conclusive actuality, as something dissociable from both, its historical becoming, and the multifold mediations through which it appears as such and becomes meaningful in society, is thus anything but neutral.

Documentary filmmaker Robert Kramer put it in a nutshell when he wrote that “Power is the possibility to define what is real”.<sup>20</sup> By determining what is actually real, authoritative instances appropriate the agency to determine what is genuine, truthful, and pertinent in it. Documentaries that uncritically reproduce hegemonic ideas about reality by taking on a detached, allegedly impartial position, corroborate their assumed universal validity and endorse implicit attributions such as the supremacy of allegedly serious sources, trustworthy methods and coherent models of knowledge production. What is more, they even increase their authority by setting (and constantly reproducing) standards for the perception of reality. For documentaries shape the audiovisual appearance of reality and reiterate schemas which directly associate images and sounds with specific meanings. They do not merely *reproduce* what is already there, but *forge* a particular

discernment that appears to logically stem from the representation itself. In this sense, documentary and complementary media productions have a transformative effect: they normalize certain representational conventions through which something acquires a particular value as real, effective, decent, credible, and true. Common features such as authoritative voice-overs, interviews with experts, the recourse to apparently authentic footage, archive material, or statistical data mirror that form of veracity to such an extent that their constructedness passes almost unnoticed. “Each statement, each piece of news, each thought has been preformed by the centres of the culture industry”, writes Adorno in *Minima Moralia*. “Whatever lacks the familiar trace of such preformation lacks credibility, the more so because the institutions of public opinion accompany what they send forth by a thousand factual proofs and all the plausibility that total power can lay hands on.”<sup>21</sup> It is this omnipresence and implicitness of conventionalized patterns that eventually exacerbate the distinction between populist productions, films resulting from thorough research and documentaries that respond to mere market orientation.<sup>22</sup>

#### SUBVERTING THE STANDARD

When standardized forms associated with hegemonic conceptions about the very constitution of the real are unquestionably reproduced over and over again, they tend to culminate in homogenized idea of reality as a coherent whole – a reality principle. The latter is to be understood “not simply [as] some kind of natural way associated with how things are [...]”, as Alenka Zupančič puts it. “The reality principle itself is ideologically mediated; one could even claim that it constitutes the highest form of ideology, the ideology that presents itself as empirical fact or (biological, economic...) necessity (and that we tend to perceive as nonideological).”<sup>23</sup> The problem lies in the fact that such an impenetrable, self-evident representation of reality pervades society through and through, and encourages an equally pervasive reactive attitude. For that which appears as imperatively real imposes its validity, and what results out of it as its logical or natural consequences cannot but be accepted – even if that which thereby appears as ineluctable is repression, discrimination and misery. Adorno called such an attitude an “overvalued realism”<sup>24</sup> (*überwertiger Realismus*). If reality is ineluctably thus, then there is nothing to be done about it; the current conditions have to be endured, because any attempt to transform them would be in vain. The critique of presenting an actual reality as inevitable or natural is not new.

Already Karl Marx criticized the claim to present a situation as naturally given rather than as historically developed social configuration as a strategy to sanction the ruling power structure of capitalism.<sup>25</sup> In a similar vein, Alain Badiou defines the dominant economic discourse and its self-

proclamation as the current “guardian of the real”<sup>26</sup>. Presenting itself as a neutral analyst of the global situation rather than its foremost agent, this authoritative discourse and the corresponding media formats pose the current conditions and the status quo as given. This is how, time and again, the logics, values and effects of capitalism are tacitly reiterated as incontestable, fateful norms rather than as permanent generators of the situation. Even the periodic revelation of scandals – an increasingly popular theme in contemporary commercial documentary - does not challenge its hegemony. Quite the contrary: scandals only confirm the rule when they are presented as an exception. For rather than questioning the underlying power structures through which society is constituted and which facilitate that such scandals erupt, they isolate particular cases of wrongdoing and treat them in a particularistic manner. “And so”, writes Badiou, “the scandal is something which is useful to the system because it presents, as an exception, the rule itself.”<sup>27</sup> By neglecting to consider the internal antagonisms of capitalism and its complex entanglements with colonialism, imperialism, the ecological crises, etc., such assertions to cover the real realistically block every radical transformation – an issue that has also been addressed by Mark Fisher under the label of “capitalist realism” in an eponymous book.<sup>28</sup> Documentary formats that unquestionably reproduce such paradigms and give it a recognizable, conclusive shape, both contribute to the hegemony of such “realistic” determinations and anchor their impact on society.

Against such fatalistic, unilateral understandings of reality and the respective ways it is supposed to be realistically represented, artists and documentary filmmakers have joined critical philosophers in their effort to elaborate a critical stance. Alexander Kluge, for example, declared that “The motive for realism is never confirmation of reality but protest.”<sup>29</sup> Realism as he conceives it, “takes the imagination and wishes of human beings just as seriously as the world of facts”.<sup>30</sup> It is an “antagonistic realism” or “realism of the senses” that counters the overpowering effects of the persisting reality principle. Rather than providing an unquestionable truth about reality or injunctions to follow, rather than imposing conventions to respect or even explaining the real in a comprehensive way, Kluge – and many other contemporary artists and documentary filmmakers – aims at critically apprehending reality without pacifying its conflicting layers of sense, matter and rationality. Actual reality, as he understands it, is not an objective realm opposed to the ambiguous realm of subjectivity or the illusory realm of images. On the contrary, the objective realm is itself mediated through societal apprehension and saturated by images, sounds, patterns and schemas. The latter not only mould its audio-visual appearance and self-representation, but also have become an integral part of it. The predominance of the male gaze, of imperialist, colonial, heteronormative or eurocentrist depiction of “us” and the other, or the seemingly self-evident value of work, consumption or the idea of progress – all these allegedly ‘realistic’ representations have shaped

reality and continue to form it further through constant repetition of the ever-same stereotypes and benchmarks.

Countering the common imagery of society and its corresponding norm and value structure thus means undermining conventions, carving out that which is hidden in the folds of representation, and configuring relations anew. It means not only showing things differently and giving visibility to hitherto neglected or oppressed subjects, but also to consider the actual ramifications of the common sensical perception of reality as a crucial part of its constitution as such. Films proceeding in such a critical manner aim to “extract an Image from all the clichés and to set it up against them”, in Gilles Deleuze’s words.<sup>31</sup> It is thus not simply a matter of proposing an alternative version of the real “as it really is”, but of breaking open a gridlocked way of representing reality through a conscientious reassessment of the sensory and intelligible configuration of the real. The aim is neither, for such artists and filmmakers, to redefine what reality really is, nor to provide definite answers. On the contrary, it is to reopen a space for difference, alterity and contradiction through filmic means. As Trinh T Min-ha puts it, “To compose is not always synonymous with ordering-so-as-to-persuade, and to give the filmed document another sense, another meaning, is not necessarily to distort it. If life’s paradoxes and complexities are not to be suppressed, the question of degree and nuance is incessantly crucial. Meaning can therefore be political only when it does not let itself easily stabilized, and when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but, rather, empties or decentralizes it.”<sup>32</sup>

What is at stake is thus an artistic intervention in the relation between contents and the forms that mediate them. “The formal construction of a work is far from an add-on or surface feature,” as Michael Renov puts it. “Rather the formal domain is about the work of construction, the play of the signifier, the vehicle of meaning for every instance of human communication. The formal regime is the very portal of sense-making; it determines the viewer’s access to the expression of ideas, its power to move and transform an audience.”<sup>33</sup> In this sense, form itself is to be understood as “sedimented content,” as Adorno writes with regards to what he understands as genuine art.<sup>34</sup> For form and content cannot be fully dissociated; they are mediated one through the other and acquire their meaning only in conjunction. Standardized forms convey the very societal logic that put them forth, and which they cannot but subliminally reproduce. Therefore, to carve out a truth content beyond the societal facade of consentaneity and perspicuity means to elaborate forms that are able to resist direct assimilation into established patterns.

This cannot, of course, be achieved by following a however predefined model, style or procedure. Filmmakers have developed very different filmic means with regards to particular constellations of the real. Even the direct cinema of the 1960s, reputedly aspiring to provide a

direct reproduction of that which appears in front of the camera, proceeds in this critical sense. As Jean-Louis Comolli wrote in 1969, “In direct cinema...filming is never a moment of repetition or reconstruction of ‘reality’. Nor is it quite that of a selection inside a pre-filmic reality (as the reproduction and elaboration of the script is in re-presentational cinema). Rather it is a moment of *accumulation*. Often without any fixed ‘programme’, a whole quantity of film is shot, the ultimate end of which is neither determined nor known. What this involves is of course images of ‘reality’, filmed events, but in some sense these are floating images without a referent, divested of any stable significance and open to all-comers...Direct cinema rejects all *a priori* forms or signification, and all pre-determination and aims, not to reproduce things ‘as they are’ (as they are intended by the scenario of the film or of ‘life’ - i.e. of ideology), but positively to transform them, to take them from an unformed, uncinematic stage to the stage of cinematic form.”<sup>35</sup> Other artistic strategies consist in radically deflecting the focus and thereby producing hitherto unexperienced perspectives, or in presenting a reality in a completely different way from how it is usually represented. Often, they take a reflexive stance or intermingle subjective considerations and objective conditions, or subvert the obvious appearance of an actual situation through experimental editing. Some documentary filmmakers revisit archive material or found footage in order to carve out inherent layers of meaning by rearranging it in unexpected, challenging ways, or turn the focus onto the question the agency of images themselves and examine the ways how they frame and control society, or how they are employed for military, disciplinary or economic purposes. In any case, the artistic intervention meshes with the political element of perception and emphasizes, in one way or another, its societal impact on reality. The reality such critical artists and filmmakers deal with is not considered a consistent unity, but a conflictual field in which the very reality of representation is as important a layer to ponder as the factual reality and its societal mediation.

#### PROBLEMATIZING THE REAL

Jacques Rancière’s writings on documentary film address precisely such critical artistic practices that oppose, through their work, established standards and interpretations of hegemonic conceptions of reality. Rather than aiming to define documentary as a genre, to analyze its characteristic features, or to examine how to represent the real truthfully, Rancière upholds, first and foremost, that the real is itself to be problematized. Herein lies for him the particular potential of documentary film: while feature films usually expend great effort in producing a realistic feel (and thereby all too often succumb to stereotypical representations), “so-called documentary film” is able to address the real directly as a problem.<sup>36</sup> More precisely, it is because the reference to the

real is immanent to documentary film that the latter is able to concomitantly penetrate it and take critical distance from established representations and attributions, in order to experiment with alternative compositions of the signs, bodies, actions, and meanings of the real.

But what is the real Rancière refers to? On the one hand, he neither conceives of it as one stable, external referent, nor as an eternal essence concealed under a veil of false appearances. Rather than an objective, coherent entity awaiting its adequate portrayal, the real is a contradictory force field whose very constitution cannot be fully dissociated from the divergent perceptions, experiences, and meanings through which it is mediated and which constitute its movements. Objective conditions and subjective experiences, aesthetical and political configurations, sensory and intellectual modes of comprehending are interlaced on many levels. On the other hand, however, the actual conditions reigning in reality, its political constitution and implicit social formation of values and norms, impose manifold restrictions. Societal organization appears as an effective construction based on an underlying consensus about that which is visible, sayable, and feasible and that which is (and those who are) excluded from public consideration. Reality is thus tacitly regulated through a configuration of that which is deemed as real or imaginary, as significant or meaningless, rational or irrational, important or irrelevant, normal or deviant. How reality is perceived is a question of the “distribution of the sensible” [*partage du sensible*] which provides the conditions of possibility not only for experience, perception, and knowledge, but also for social change and political action. Problematizing the real means, in this sense, to wrest that which appears as all too obvious, ineluctable or common from its natural appearance, and to challenge the hegemonic determinations operating in reality. It is, in Rancière’s words, the production of a *dissensus* - “a division inserted in ‘common sense’: a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given.”<sup>37</sup> Problematizing the real thus means penetrating into its entrenched constitution and disrupting its manifest appearance so as to break its established forms and logics open and configure it anew.

The process of disassembling and reconfiguring the signs and meanings, the bodies, objects, and movements of the real is what Rancière calls fiction: “Fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective.”<sup>38</sup> It does so by “undo[ing], and then re-articulat[ing], connections between signs and images, images and times, and signs and spaces, framing a given sense of reality, a given ‘commonsense’. It is a practice that invents new trajectories between what can be seen, what can be said and what can be done.”<sup>39</sup> Documentary, which is “capable of greater fictional invention than ‘fiction’ film,”<sup>40</sup> is thus for him anything but “non-fiction”. For fiction is not equated with the

denial of facts. That which is produced through fiction is not merely a pure illusory fantasy beyond the real world either. On the contrary: fiction is for Rancière a particular mode of intelligibility that reassesses the facts and the ways of making sense of them through sensory and intelligible means. This mode is not limited to the sphere of the arts: it permeates society through and through, and determines political and historiographical ways of perceiving and interpreting reality. For “the real has to be fictionalized in order to be thought”, as Rancière writes with regards to both, artistic and historical approaches to the real – an idea that resonates with Alexander Kluge’s famous dictum that “it must be possible to present reality as the historical fiction that it is.”<sup>41</sup> Against the positivistic understanding of an objective realm, a factual reality that could be fully dissociated from a subjective sphere, both Rancière and Kluge uphold the transformative potential of the work of fiction which makes it possible to articulate them together.

Accordingly, the dividing line lies not between documentary and fiction, but between different stances towards reality taken on by a film. In a sense, Rancière’s approach is itself a redistribution of the common understanding, which opposes fiction and documentary as complementary genres. Moreover, it is also a division of the very notion of documentary itself. For Rancière not only discards quite a lot of films that are usually considered as such; he even mobilizes a certain idea of documentary as problematization of reality through artistic means *against* another conception of documentary – the commonly accepted idea mentioned above that documentaries ought to provide a coherent, affirmative, “realistic” representation of reality, as adopted in many mainstream productions, television or internet formats, or educational films. For what is challenged in the artistic documentary practices to which Rancière refers, are precisely the hegemonic ideas of reality that such films claiming to present reality “as it really is” corroborate by alleging to provide a direct, objective access to the real.

The question of the real as addressed by and through documentary is thus more complex than it might seem at first. For neither is the real a unilateral concept independent of the ways it is apprehended, grasped and framed, nor is documentary film a purely disinterested, clearly definable genre. What comes to the fore is the intricate interplay between the constitution of reality and its perception as real. It is not only a matter of how documentary images and sounds acquire their status as reliable conveyers of knowledge or of what enters into public consideration through its medial representation, but also of how that which is presented as real, truthful and meaningful is framed, shaped, configured. The political element of perception is always, explicitly or implicitly, mobilized in documentary film. Medial representations affect the real while they mediate it: either they enshrine the current conditions, attributions and values of reality through the reproduction of

rigid schemas and conventionalized patterns, or they intercept its smooth apprehension as coherent entity by reconfiguring it differently and generating dissensual logics of perception.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli, *Cinema against Spectacle. Technique and Ideology Revisited*, trans. and ed. by Daniel Fairfax (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 133.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jill Godmilow and Ann-Louise Shapiro, “How Real is the Reality in Documentary Film?” in *History and Theory*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Theme Issue 36: Producing the Past: Making Histories Inside and Outside the Academy (Dec., 1997), 80-101, 81.

<sup>3</sup> Comolli, *Cinema against Spectacle.*, 134

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography”, in *Selected Writings Volume 2, part 2 1931-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. trans. Rodney Livingstone *et.al.* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2005), 507-530, 510.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, *Photography*, 512.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Dziga Vertov, “The Council of Three” where he writes “The main and essential thing is: The sensory exploration of the world through film. We therefore take as a point of departure the use of the camera as kino-eye, more perfect than the human eye, for the exploration of the visual chaos of visual phenomena that fill space. The kino-eye lives and moves in time and space; it gathers and records impressions in a manner wholly different from that of the human eye.” In *Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brian (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984), 14-21, 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Mary Ann Doane (ed.), “Indexicality: Trace and Sign”, *differences* 18 (1), March 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Trinh T. Minh-Ha. 1990. “Documentary Is/Not a Name” in *October* 52:76-98, 90.

<sup>9</sup> The first mention of the “documentary value” of a film is to be found in John Grierson, “Flaherty’s Poetic *Moana* (1926), in *The Documentary Film Reader. History, Theory, Criticism*, ed. Jonathan Kahana (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 86-87, 86

<sup>10</sup> John Grierson, “First Principles of Documentary” (1932-34) in *Documentary Film Reader*, 217-225, 218.

<sup>11</sup> John Grierson, “The Documentary Producer” (1933). In *Documentary Film Reader*, 215-216.

<sup>12</sup> Grierson, *Moana*, p.87.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Ian Aitken, “John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement” in *The Documentary Film Book*, ed. Brian Winsten (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, New York : Palgrave Macmillan on behalf of the British Film Institute, 2013), 129-137.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work. The Politics of American Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 11

<sup>15</sup> See for example Kahana, *Intelligence Work*; Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London and New York: Verso, 1994); Bill Nichols, *Representing reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real II: Documentary:*

*Grierson and Beyond* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire [England], New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> In the article “Documentary”, Plantinga writes: “In nonfiction, the filmmaker takes the assertive stance, presenting states of affairs as occurring in the actual world. Thus the characteristic illocutionary act of the documentary filmmaker is to present the world of the work assertively.”, in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, ed. Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (London, New York: Routledge, 2009), 494-504, 498.

<sup>17</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), 56.

<sup>18</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London, New York: Verso books, 2005) 69-70.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2006) 158.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Kramer. “Être ou ne pas être dans le plan?” 1991, <http://derives.tv/etre-ou-ne-pas-etre-dans-le-plan/> Accessed January 2, 2021, (translated by the author).

<sup>21</sup> Theodor W Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 208.

<sup>22</sup> See Stefanie Baumann, “How to Mediate Reality: Thinking Documentary Film with Adorno and Horkheimer” in *How to Critique Authoritarian Populism. Methodologies of the Frankfurt School*, ed. Jeremiah Morelock, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2021), 412-430.

<sup>23</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow. Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2003), 77

<sup>24</sup> See Theodor W. Adorno, “Erziehung-Wozu?”, in *Theodor W. Adorno. Erziehung zur Mündigkeit*, ed. Gerd Kadelbach (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), 105-119 (translation by the author).

<sup>25</sup> In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, for example, he polemically writes: “Economists have a singular method of procedure. There are only two kinds of institutions for them, artificial and natural. The institutions of feudalism are artificial institutions, those of the bourgeoisie are natural institutions. In this they resemble the theologians, who likewise establish two kinds of religion. Every religion which is not theirs is an invention of men, while their own is an emanation from God. When the economists say that present-day relations—the relations of bourgeois production—are natural, they imply that these are the relations in which wealth is created and productive forces developed in conformity with the laws of nature. These relations therefore are themselves natural laws independent of the influence of time. They are eternal laws which must always govern society. Thus there has been history, but there is no longer any. There has been history, since there were the institutions of feudalism, and in these institutions of feudalism we find quite different relations of production from those of bourgeois society, which the economists try to pass off as natural and as such, eternal.” Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works Vol. 6 1845-1848* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 105-212, 201.

<sup>26</sup> Alain Badiou, “In Search of the Lost Real” in *Badiou and his Interlocutors. Lectures, Interviews, Responses*, ed. A.J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens (London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 7-16, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Badiou, *Search of the Lost Real*, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: is There no Alternative?* (Winchester, Washington: Zero Books, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Kluge, “The Sharpest Ideology: That Reality Appeals to its Realistic Character” (trans. David Roberts), in Alexander Kluge. *Raw Materials for the Imagination*, ed. Tara Forest (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 192.

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Kluge, “Ein Hauptansatz des Ulmer Instituts (1980)”, in *In Gefahr und größter Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod: Texte zu Kino, Film, Politik*, ed. Christian Schulte (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 1999), 59. Quoted and translated by Tara Forrest in *Realism as Protest. Kluge, Schlingensiefel, Haneke* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015), 18.

<sup>31</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement Image*, trans. by H. Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 210.

<sup>32</sup> Trinh T. Minh-Há, *Documentary*, 89.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Renov, “Art, Documentary as Art”, in *The Documentary Film Book*, 345-352, 348.

<sup>34</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 198.

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<sup>35</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli, “The Detour Through the Direct”, in *Realism and the Cinema*, ed. Christopher Williams (London: BFO, 1980), 225-243, 243; first published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 209 and 211, February and April 1969, 243.

<sup>36</sup> Rancière, *Film Fables*, 17-18.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Who is the subject of the Rights of Man?” in *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London, New York: Continuum, 2010), 62-75, 69.

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Rancière, “The Paradoxes of Political Art” in *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London, New York: Continuum, 2010), 134-151, 141.

<sup>39</sup> Rancière, *Paradoxes*, 149.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetic. The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill, (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 34.

<sup>41</sup> Kluge, *The Sharpest Ideology*, 191.