

Documentary Is/Not a Name

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Documentary Is/Not a Name

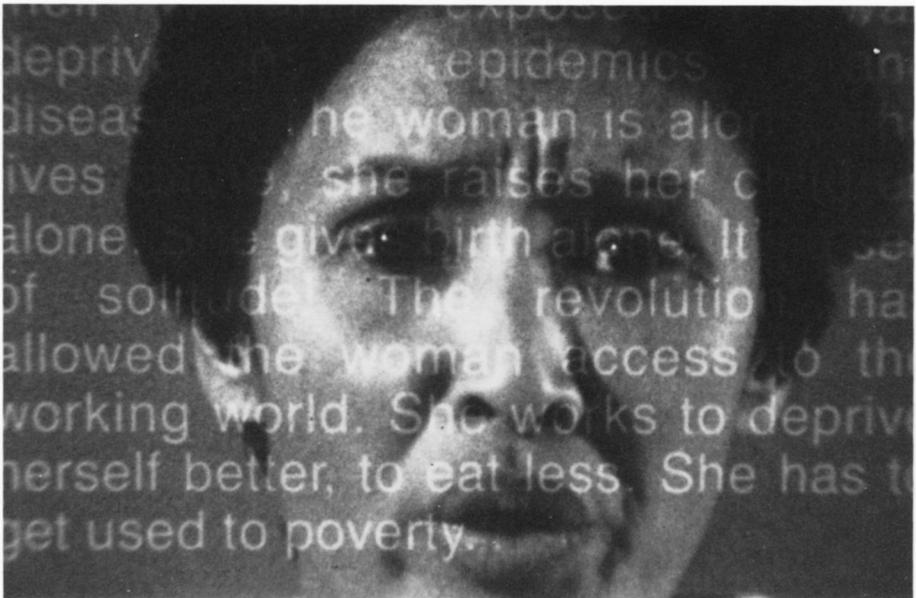
TRINH T. MINH-HA

Nothing is poorer than a truth expressed as it was thought.

—Walter Benjamin

There is no such thing as *documentary*—whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques. This assertion—as old and as fundamental as the antagonism between names and reality—needs incessantly to be restated, despite the very visible existence of a documentary tradition. In film, such a tradition, far from undergoing crisis today, is likely to fortify itself through its very recurrence of declines and rebirths. The narratives that attempt to unify/purify its practices by positing evolution and continuity from one period to the next are numerous indeed, relying heavily on traditional historicist concepts of periodization.

In a completely catalogued world, cinema is often reified into a corpus of traditions. On the one hand, truth is produced, induced, and extended according to the regime in power. On the other, truth lies in between all regimes of truth. To question the image of a historicist account of documentary as a continuous unfolding does not necessarily mean championing discontinuity; and to resist meaning does not necessarily lead to its mere denial. Truth, even when “caught on the run,” does not yield itself either in names or in filmic frames; and meaning should be prevented from coming to closure at either what is said or what is shown. Truth and meaning: the two are likely to be equated with one another. Yet, what is put forth as truth is often nothing more than *a* meaning. And what persists between the meaning of something and its truth is the interval, a break without which meaning would be fixed and truth congealed. This is perhaps why it is so difficult to talk about it, the interval. About the cinema. About. The words will not ring true. Not true; for what is one to do with films that set out to determine truth from falsity while the visibility of this truth lies precisely in the fact that it is false? How is one to cope with a “film theory” that can never theorize “about” film, but only *with* concepts that film raises in relation to concepts of other practices?



*Trinh T. Minh-ha. Surname Viet Given Name Nam. 1989.
(All stills are from films by the author.)*

A man went to a Taoist temple and asked that his fortune be told. "First," said the priest, "you must donate incense money, otherwise the divination might not be as accurate as possible. Without such a donation, in fact, none of it will come true!"

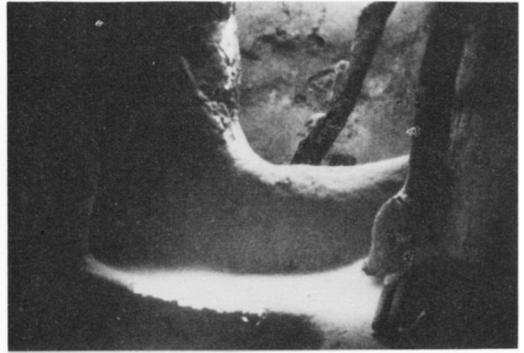
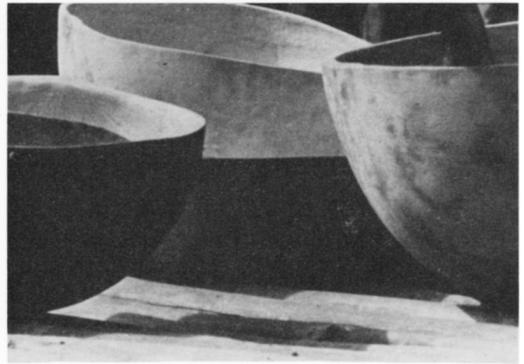
—*Wit and Humor from Old Cathay*

Concepts are no less practical than images or sound. And, theory does have to be (de)constructed as it (de)construes its object of study. While concepts of cinema are not readymades and do not preexist cinema, they are not theory *about* cinema either. The setting up of practice against theory, and vice-versa, is at best a tool for reciprocal challenge, but like all binary oppositions, it is caught in the net of a positivist thinking whose impetus is to supply answers at all costs, thereby limiting both theory and practice to a process of totalization. *I'm sorry, if we're going to use words we should be accurate in our use of them. It isn't a question of technique, it is a question of the material. If the material is actual, then it is documentary. If the material is invented, then it is not documentary . . . If you get so muddled up in your use of the term, stop using it. Just talk about films. Anyway, very often when we use these terms, they only give us an opportunity to avoid really discussing the film.*¹ In the general effort to analyze film and to produce "theory about film," there is an unavoidable tendency to reduce film theory to an area of specialization and of expertise, one that serves to constitute a *discipline*. There is also advocacy of an Enlightenment and bourgeois conception of language, which holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, its addressee a human subject (the linear, hierarchical order of things in a world of reification); whereas, language as the "medium" of communication in its most radical sense, "only communicates itself *in* itself."² The referential function of language is thus not negated, but freed from its false identification with the phenomenal world and from its assumed authority as a means of cognition about that world. Theory can be the very place where this negative knowledge about the reliability of theory's own operative principles is made accessible, and where theoretical categories, like all classificatory schemes, keep on being voided, rather than appropriated, reiterated, safeguarded.

Documentary is said to have come about as a need to inform the people (Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* or *Camera-Truth*), and subsequently to have affirmed itself as a reaction against the monopoly of the movie as entertainment came to have on the uses of film. Cinema was redefined as an ideal medium for social indoctrination and comment, the virtues of which lay in its capacity for "observing

1. Lindsay Anderson, as quoted in G. Roy Levin, *Documentary Explorations: Fifteen Interviews with Film-Makers*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1971, p. 66.

2. Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, London, Verso, 1979, p. 109.



From *Naked Spaces - Living is Round*. 1985.

and selecting from life itself," for "opening up the screen on the real world," for photographing "the living scene and the living story," for giving cinema "power over a million and one images," as well as for achieving "an intimacy of knowledge and effect impossible to the shimsham mechanics of the studio and the lily-fingered interpretation of the metropolitan actor."³ Asserting its independence from the studio and the star system, documentary has its *raison d'être* in a strategic distinction. It puts the social function of film *on the market*. It takes real people and real problems from the real world and *deals with* them. It *sets a value* on intimate observation and *assesses its worth* according to how well it succeeds in capturing reality on the run, "without material interference, without intermediary." Powerful living stories, infinite authentic situations. There are no retakes. The stage is thus no more and no less than life itself. *With the documentary approach the film gets back to its fundamentals. . . . By selection, elimination and coordination of natural elements, a film form evolves which is original and not bound by theatrical or literary tradition. . . . The documentary film is an original art form. It has*

3. John Grierson, in Forsyth Hardy, ed., *Grierson On Documentary*, New York, Praeger, 1971, pp. 146-147.

*come to grips with facts—on its own original level. It covers the rational side of our lives, from the scientific experiment to the poetic landscape-study, but never moves away from the factual.*⁴

The real world: so real that the Real becomes the one basic referent—pure, concrete, fixed, visible, all-too-visible. The result is the advent of a whole aesthetic of objectivity and the development of comprehensive technologies of truth capable of promoting what is right and what is wrong in the world and, by extension, what is “honest” and what is “manipulative” in documentary. This involves an extensive and relentless pursuit of naturalism across all the elements of cinematic technology. Indispensable to this cinema of the authentic image and spoken word are, for example, the directional microphone (localizing and restricting in its process of selecting sound for purposes of decipherability) and the Nagra portable tape-recorder (unrivalled for its maximally faithful ability to document). Lip-synchronous sound is validated as the norm; it is a “must”—not so much in replicating reality (this much has been acknowledged among the fact-makers) as in “showing real people in real locations at real tasks.” (Even non-sync sounds recorded in context are considered “less authentic” because the technique of sound synchronization and its institutionalized use have become “nature” within film culture.) Real time is thought to be more “truthful” than filmic time, hence the long-take (that is, a take lasting the length of the 400-foot roll of commercially available film stock) and minimal or no editing (change at the cutting stage is “trickery,” as if montage did not happen at the stages of conception and shooting) are declared to be more appropriate if one is to avoid distortions in structuring the material. The camera is the switch onto life. Accordingly, the close-up is condemned for its partiality, while the wide angle is claimed as more objective because it includes more in the frame; hence it can mirror the event-in-context more faithfully. (The more, the larger, the truer—as if wider framing is less a framing than tighter shots.) The light-weight, hand-held camera, with its independence from the tripod—the fixed observation post—is extolled for its ability “to go unnoticed,” since it must be at once mobile and invisible, integrated into the milieu so as to change as little as possible, but also able to put its intrusion to use to provoke people into uttering the “truth” they would not otherwise unveil in ordinary situations.

*Thousands of bunglers have made the word [documentary] come to mean a deadly, routine form of film-making, the kind an alienated consumer society might appear to deserve—the art of talking a great deal during a film, with a commentary imposed from the outside, in order to say nothing, and to show nothing.*⁵ The perfectly objective social

4. Hans Richter, “Film as an Original Art Form,” in R. Dyer MacCann, ed., *Film: A Montage of Theories*, New York, Dutton, 1966, p. 183.

5. Louis Morcorelles, *Living Cinema: New Directions in Contemporary Film-Making*, trans. I. Quigly, New York, Praeger, 1973, p. 37.



From Surname Viet Given Name Nam. 1989.



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observer may no longer stand as the cherished model among documentary-makers today, but with every broadcast the viewer, Everyman, continues to be taught that he or she is first and foremost a Spectator. Either one is not responsible for what one sees (because only the event presented counts) or the only way one can have some influence on things is by sending in (monetary) donations. Thus, though the filmmaker's perception may readily be admitted as unavoidably personal, the objectiveness of the reality of what is seen and represented remains unchallenged. [*Cinéma-vérité*:] *it would be better to call it cinema-sincerity. . . . That is, that you ask the audience to have confidence in the evidence, to say to the audience, "This is what I saw. I didn't fake it, this is what happened. . . . I look at what happened with my subjective eye and this is what I believe took place. . . . It's a question of honesty.*⁶

What is presented as evidence remains evidence, whether the observing eye qualifies itself as being subjective or objective. At the core of such a rationale dwells, untouched, the Cartesian division between subject and object that perpetuates a dualistic inside-versus-outside, mind-against-matter view of the world. Again, the emphasis is laid on the power of film to capture reality "out there" for us "in here." The moment of appropriation and of consumption is either simply ignored or carefully rendered invisible according to the rules of good and bad documentary. The art of talking-to-say-nothing goes hand-in-hand with the will to say, and to say only to confine something in a meaning. Truth has to be made vivid, interesting; it has to be "dramatized" if it is to convince the audience of the evidence, whose "confidence" in it allows truth to take shape. *Documentary—the presentation of actual facts in a way that makes them credible and telling to people at the time.*⁷

The real? Or the repetitive, artificial resurrection of the real, an operation whose overpowering success in substituting the visual and verbal signs of the real for the real itself ultimately helps challenge the real, thereby intensifying the uncertainties engendered by any clear-cut division between the two. In the scale of what is more and what is less real, subject matter is of prime importance ("It is very difficult if not impossible," says a film festival administrator, "to ask jurors of a panel in the documentary film category not to identify the quality of a film with the subject it treats"). The focus is undeniably on common experience, by which the "social" is defined: an experience that features, as a famed documentary-maker (Pierre Perrault) put it (paternalistically): "man, simple man, who has never expressed himself."⁸

The socially oriented filmmaker is thus the almighty voice-giver (here, in

6. Jean Rouch, as quoted in *Documentary Explorations*, p. 135.

7. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 73.

8. Quoted in *Living Cinema*, p. 26.

a vocalizing context that is all-male), whose position of authority in the production of meaning continues to go unchallenged, skillfully masked as it is by its righteous mission. The relationship between mediator and medium, or the mediating activity, is either ignored—that is, assumed to be transparent, as value-free and as insentient as an instrument of reproduction ought to be—or else, it is treated most conveniently: by humanizing the gathering of evidence so as to further the status quo (“Of course, like all human beings I am subjective, but nonetheless, I have confidence in the evidence!”). Good documentaries are those whose subject matter is “correct” and whose point of view the viewer agrees with. What is involved may be a question of honesty (*vis-à-vis* the material), but it is often also a question of (ideological) adherence, hence of legitimization.

Films made about the common people are, furthermore, naturally promoted as films made for the same people, and only for them. In the desire to service the needs of the un-expressed, there is, commonly enough, the urge to define them and their needs. More often than not, for example, when filmmakers find themselves in debates in which a film is criticized for its simplistic and reductive treatment of a subject, resulting in a maintenance of the very status quo it sets out to challenge, their tendency is to dismiss the criticism by arguing that the film is not made for “sophisticated viewers like ourselves, but for a general audience,” thereby situating themselves above and apart from the *real* audience, those “out there,” the simple-minded folks who need everything they see explained to them. Despite the shift of emphasis—from the world of the upwardly mobile and the very affluent that dominates the media to that of “their poor”—what is maintained intact is the age-old opposition between the creative, intelligent supplier and the mediocre, unenlightened consumer. The pretext for perpetuating such division is the belief that social relations are determinate, hence endowed with objectivity. *By “impossibility of the social” I understand . . . the assertion of the ultimate impossibility of all “objectivity” . . . society presents itself, to a great degree, not as an objective, harmonic order, but as an ensemble of divergent forces which do not seem to obey any unified or unifying logic. How can this experience of the failure of objectivity be made compatible with the affirmation of an ultimate objectivity of the real?*⁹ The silent common people—those who “have never expressed themselves” unless they are given the opportunity to voice their thoughts by the one who comes to redeem them—are constantly summoned to signify the real world. They are the fundamental referent of the social, hence it suffices to point the camera at them, to show their (industrialized) poverty, or to contextualize and package their unfamiliar lifestyles for the ever-buying and donating general audience “back here,” in order to enter the sanctified realm of the morally right, or the social. In

9. Ernesto Laclau, as quoted in “Building a New Left: An Interview with Ernest Laclau,” *Strategies*, no. 1 (Fall 1988), p. 15.

other words, when the so-called “social” reigns, how these people(/we) come to visibility in the media, how meaning is given to their(/our) lives, how their(/our) truth is construed or how truth is laid down for them(/us) and despite them(/us), how representation relates to or *is* ideology, how media hegemony continues its relentless course is simply not at issue.

There isn't any cinéma-vérité. It's necessarily a lie, from the moment the director intervenes—or it isn't cinema at all.

—Georges Franju

When the social is hypostatized and enshrined as an ideal of transparency, when it itself becomes commodified in a form of sheer administration (better service, better control), the interval between the real and the image/d or between the real and the rational shrinks to the point of unreality. Thus, to address the question of production relations, as raised earlier, is endlessly to reopen the question: how is the real (or the social ideal of good representation) produced? Rather than catering to it, striving to capture and discover its truth as a concealed or lost object, it is therefore important also to keep asking: how is truth being ruled? *The penalty of realism is that it is about reality and has to bother forever not about being 'beautiful' but about being right.*¹⁰

The fathers of documentary initially insisted that documentary is not News, but Art (a “new and vital art form,” as Grierson once proclaimed): that its essence is not information (as with “the hundreds of tweedle-dum ‘industrials’ or worker-education films”); not reportage; not newsreels; but something close to “a creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson’s renowned definition).

Documentary may be anti-aesthetic, as some still affirm in the line of the British forerunner, but it is claimed to be no less an art, albeit an art within the limits of factuality. When, in a world of reification, truth is widely equated with fact, any explicit use of the magic, poetic, or irrational qualities specific to the film medium itself would have to be excluded a priori as nonfactual. The question is not so much one of sorting out—illusory as this may be—what is inherently factual from what is not in a body of *preexisting* filmic techniques, as it is one of abiding by the laws of naturalism in film. In the reality of formula-films, only validated techniques are *right*, others are de facto wrong. All, however, depend on their degree of invisibility in producing meaning. Thus, shooting at any speed other than the standard 24-frames-per-second (the speed necessitated for lip-sync sound) is, for example, often condemned as a form of manipulation, implying thereby that manipulateness has to be discreet—that is, acceptable only when

10. Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, p. 249.



From Surname Viet Given Name Nam. 1989.



not easily perceptible to the “real audience.” Although the whole of filmmaking is a question of manipulation—whether “creative” or not—those endorsing the law unhesitatingly decree which technique is manipulative and which, supposedly, is not; and this judgment is made according to the degree of visibility of each. *A documentary film is shot with three cameras: 1) the camera in the technical sense; 2) the filmmaker’s mind; and 3) the generic patterns of the documentary film, which are founded on the expectations of the audience that patronizes it. For this reason one cannot simply say that the documentary film portrays facts. It photographs isolated facts and assembles from them a coherent set of facts according to three divergent schemata. All remaining possible facts and factual contexts are excluded. The naive treatment of documentation therefore provides a unique opportunity to concoct fables. In and of itself, the documentary is no more realistic than the feature film.*¹¹

Reality is more fabulous, more maddening, more strangely manipulative than fiction. To understand this is to recognize the naiveté of a development of cinematic technology that promotes increasingly unmediated access to reality. It is to see through the poverty of what Benjamin deplored as “a truth expressed as it was thought” and to understand why progressive fiction films are attracted by and constantly pay tribute to documentary techniques. These films put the “documentary effect” to advantage, playing on the viewer’s expectations in order to “concoct fables.” The documentary can easily thus become a “style”: it no longer constitutes a mode of production or an attitude toward life, but proves to be only an element of aesthetics (or anti-aesthetics), which at best, and without acknowledging it, it tends to be in any case when, within its own factual limits, it reduces itself to a mere category, or a set of persuasive techniques. Many of these techniques have become so “natural” to the language of broadcast television that they “go unnoticed.” These are, for example, the “personal testimony” technique (a star appears on screen to advertize his or her use of a certain product); the “plain folks” technique (a politician arranges to eat hot dogs in public); the “band wagon” technique (the use of which conveys the message that “everybody is doing it, why not you?”); or the “card stacking” technique (in which prearrangements for a “survey” show that a certain brand of product is more popular than any other to the inhabitants of a given area).¹²

You must re-create reality because reality runs away; reality denies reality. You must first interpret it, or re-create it. . . . When I make a documentary, I try to give the realism an artificial aspect. . . . I find that the aesthetic of a document comes from the artificial aspect of the document . . . it has to be more beautiful than realism, and therefore it

11. Alexander Kluge, as quoted in *Alexander Kluge, A Retrospective*, New York, The Goethe Institutes of North America, 1988, p. 4.

12. John Mercer, *An Introduction to Cinematography*, Champaign, Illinois, Stipes Publishing Co., 1968, p. 159.

*has to be composed . . . to give it another sense.*¹³ A documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction. It does not work to conceal or exclude what is normalized as “non-factual,” for it understands the mutual dependence of realism and “artificiality” in the process of filmmaking. It recognizes the necessity of composing (on) life in living it or making it. Documentary reduced to a mere vehicle of facts may be used to advocate a cause, but it does not constitute one in itself; hence the perpetuation of the bipartite system of division in the content-versus-form rationale. 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 be easily stabilized, and when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but, rather, empties or decentralizes it. Thus, even when this source is referred to, it stands as one among many others, at once plural and utterly singular. In its demand to *mean* at any rate, the “documentary” often forgets how it comes about and how aesthetics and politics remain inseparable in its constitution. For, when not equated with mere techniques of beautifying, aesthetics allows one to experience life differently, or as some would say, to give it “another sense,” remaining in tune with its drifts and shifts.

From its descriptions to its arrangements and rearrangements, reality on the move may be heightened or impoverished but is never neutral (that is, objective). *Documentary at its purest and most poetic is a form in which the elements that you use are the actual elements.*¹⁴ The notion of “making strange” and of reflexivity remains but a mere distancing device so long as the division between “textual artifice” and “social attitude” exerts its power.¹⁵ The “social” continues to go unchallenged, history keeps on being salvaged, while the sovereignty of the socio-historicizing subject is safely maintained. With the status quo of the making/consuming subject preserved, the aim is to correct “errors” (the false) and to construct an alternative view (offered as a this-is-the-true or mine-is-truer version of reality). It is, in other words, to replace one source of unacknowledged authority by another, but not to challenge the very constitution of authority. The new socio-historical text thus rules despotically as another master-centered text, since it unwittingly helps to perpetuate the Master’s ideological stance.

13. Georges Franju, as quoted in *Documentary Explorations*, pp. 121, 128.

14. Lindsay Anderson, as quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 66.

15. This distinction motivates Dana Polan’s argument in, “A Brechtian Cinema? Towards a Politics of Self-Reflexive Film,” in B. Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1985, pp. 661-672.

When the textual and the political neither separate themselves from one another nor simply collapse into a single qualifier, the practice of representation can, similarly, neither be taken for granted nor merely dismissed as being ideologically reactionary. By putting representation under scrutiny, textual theory/practice has more likely helped to upset rooted ideologies by bringing the mechanics of their inner workings to the fore. It makes possible the vital differentiation between authoritative criticism and uncompromising analyses and inquiries (including those of the analyzing/inquiring activity). Moreover, it contributes to a questioning of reformist “alternative” approaches that never quite depart from the lineage of white- and male-centered humanism. Despite their explicit socio-political commitment, in the end these approaches remain unthreatening, that is, “framed,” and thus neither social nor political enough.

Reality runs away, reality denies reality. Filmmaking is after all a question of “framing” reality in its course. However, it can also be the very place where the referential function of the film image/sound is not simply negated, but reflected upon in its own operative principles and questioned in its authoritative identification with the phenomenal world. In attempts to suppress the mediation of the cinematic apparatus and the fact that language “communicates itself in itself,” there always lurks a bourgeois conception of language. *Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality . . . so that a break between ideology and text is effected.*¹⁶

To 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. By condemning self-reflexivity as pure formalism instead of challenging its diverse realizations, this ideology can “go on unnoticed,” keeping its operations invisible and serving the goal of universal expansionism. Such aversion against reflexivity goes hand in hand with its widespread appropriation as a progressive, formalistic device in cinema, since both work to reduce its function to a harmlessly decorative one. (For example, it has become commonplace to hear such remarks as “a film is a film” or “this is a film about a film.” Film-on-film statements are increasingly challenging to work with because they can easily fall prey to their own formulas and techniques.) Furthermore, reflexivity at times equated with a personal perspective, is at other times endorsed as scientific rigor.

16. Claire Johnston, “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema,” in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 1, 1976, p. 215.



From Surname Viet Given Name Nam. 1989.

Two men were discussing the joint production of wine. One said to the other: "You shall supply the rice and I the water." The second asked: "If all the rice comes from me, how shall we apportion the finished product?" The first man replied: "I shall be absolutely fair about the whole thing. When the wine is finished, each gets back exactly what he puts in—I'll siphon off the liquid and you can keep the rest."

—Wit and Humor from Old Cathay

One of the areas of documentary that remains most resistant to the reality of film-as-film is that known as anthropological filmmaking. Filmed ethnographic material, which for a long time was thought to “replicate natural perception,” has renounced this authority only to purport to provide adequate “data” for the “sampling” of culture. The claim to objectivity may no longer stand in many anthropological circles, but its authority is likely to be replaced by the sacrosanct notion of the “scientific.” Thus the recording and gathering of data and of people’s testimonies are considered to be the limited aim of “ethnographic film.” What makes a film anthropological and what makes it scientific, tautologically enough, is its “scholarly endeavor [to] respectively document and interpret according to anthropological standards.”¹⁷ Not merely ethnographic or documentary, as this definition specifies, but “scholarly” and anthropological, a fundamental scientific obsession is present in every attempt to demarcate anthropology’s territories. In order to be scientifically valid, a film needs the scientific intervention of the anthropologist, for it is only by adhering to the body of conventions set up by the community of anthropologists accredited by their “discipline” that the film can hope to qualify for the classification and be passed as a “scholarly endeavor.”

One of the familiar arguments given by anthropologists to validate their prescriptively instrumental use of film and of people is to dismiss all works by filmmakers who are “not professional anthropologists” or “amateur ethnographers” under the pretext that they are not “anthropologically informed,” hence they have “no theoretical significance from an anthropological point of view.” To advance such a blatantly self-promoting rationale to institute “a deadly routine form of filmmaking” (to quote a sentence of Marcorelles once more) is also—through anthropology’s primary task of “collecting data” for knowledge of mankind—to try to skirt what is known as the “salvage paradigm” and the issues implicated in the scientific deployment of Western world ownership.¹⁸ The stronger anthropology’s insecurity about its own project, the greater its eagerness to hold up a normative model, and the more seemingly serene its disposition to dwell in its own blinkered field.

In the sanctified terrain of anthropology, all of filmmaking is reduced to a question of method. It is demonstrated that the reason anthropological films go further than ethnographic films is because they do not, for example, just show activities being performed, but they also *explain* the “anthropological significance” of these activities (significance that, despite the disciplinary qualifier *anthropological*, is de facto identified with the meaning the natives give them

17. Henk Ketelaar, “Methodology in Anthropological Filmmaking. A Filmmaking Anthropologist’s Poltergeist?” in N. Bogaart and Henk Ketelaar, eds., *Methodology in Anthropological Filmmaking*, Gottingen, Herodot, 1983, p. 182.

18. See James Clifford, “Of Other Peoples: Beyond the ‘Salvage Paradigm,’” in Hal Foster, ed., *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, Seattle, Washington, Bay Press, 1987, pp. 121-130.

themselves). Now, obviously, in the process of fixing meaning, not every explanation is valid. This is where the expert anthropologist plays his role and where methodologies need to be devised, legitimated, and enforced. For, if a non-professional explanation is dismissed here, it is not so much because it lacks insight or theoretical grounding, as because it escapes anthropological control. In the name of science, a distinction is made between reliable and unreliable information. Anthropological and non-anthropological explanations may share the same subject matter, but they differ in the way they produce meaning. The unreliable constructs are the ones that do not obey the rules of anthropological authority, which a concerned expert like Evans-Pritchard skillfully specifies as being nothing else but “a scientific habit of mind.”¹⁹ Science defined as the most appropriate approach to the object of investigation serves as a banner for every scientific attempt to promote the West’s paternalistic role as subject of knowledge and its historicity of the Same. *The West agrees with us today that the way to Truth passes by numerous paths, other than Aristotelian Thomistic logic or Hegelian dialectic. But social and human sciences themselves must be decolonized.*²⁰

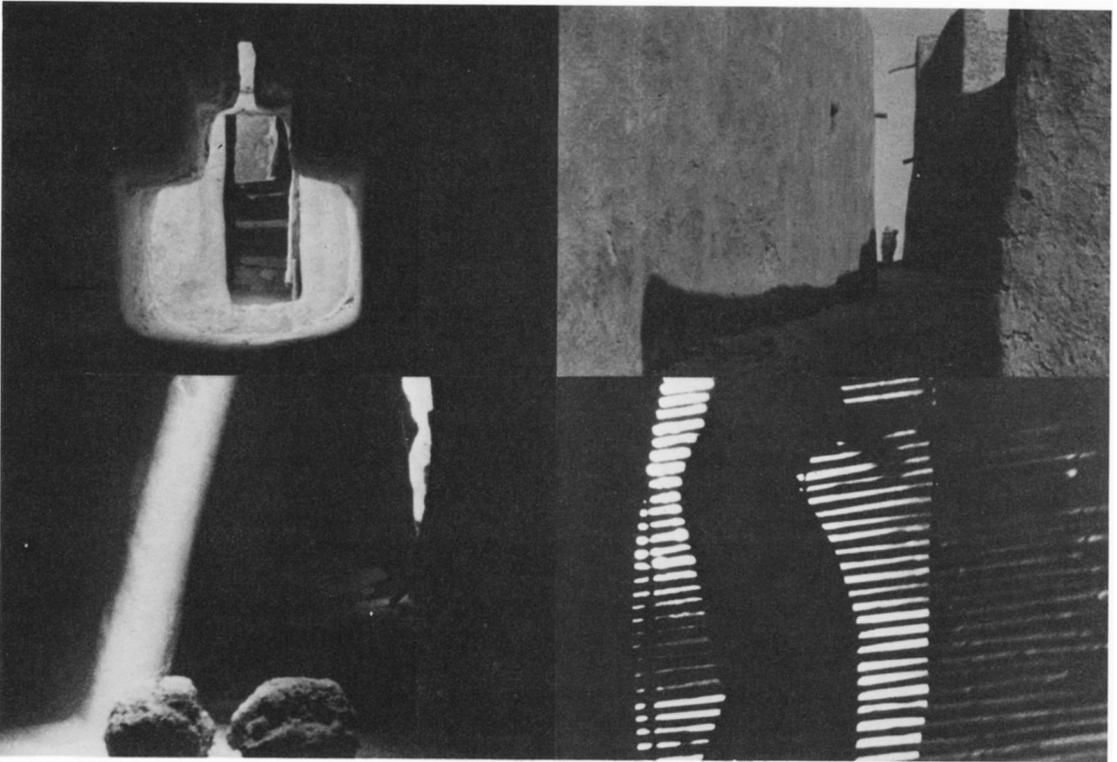
In its scientific “quest to make meaning,” anthropology constantly reactivates the power relations embedded in the Master’s confident discourses on Himself and His Other, thereby aiding both the *centripetal* and *centrifugal* movement of their global spread. With the diverse challenges issued today to the very process of producing “scientific” interpretations of culture as well as to that of making anthropological knowledge possible, visually oriented members of its community have come up with an epistemological position in which the notion of reflexivity is typically reduced to a question of technique and method. Equated with a form of self-exposure common in field work, it is discussed at times as *self-reflexivity* and at other times condemned as individualistic idealism sorely in need of being controlled if the individual maker is not to loom larger than the scientific community or the people observed. Thus, “being reflexive is virtually synonymous with being scientific.”²¹ The reasons justifying such a statement are many, but one that can be read through it and despite it is: as long as the maker abides by a series of “reflexive” techniques in filmmaking that are devised for the purpose of exposing the “context” of production and as long as the required techniques are method(olog)ically carried out, the maker can be assured that “reflexivity” is elevated to that status of scientific rigor. These reflexive techniques would include the insertion of a verbal or visual narrative about the anthropologist, the methodology adopted, and the condition of production—in

19. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980.

20. E. Mveng, “Récents développements de la théologie africaine,” *Bulletin of African Theology*, vol. 5, p. 9; as quoted in V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 37.

21. Jay Ruby, “Exposing Yourself: Reflexivity, Anthropology and Film,” *Semiotica*, no. 30 (1980), p. 165.

other words, all the conventional means of validating an anthropological text through the disciplinary practice of head- and footnoting and the totalistic concept of pre-production presentation. Those who reject such a rationale do so out of a preoccupation with the “community of scientists,” whose collective judgment they feel should be the only true form of reflection. For, an individual validation of a work can only be suspicious because it “ignores the historical development of science.” In these constant attempts at enforcing anthropology as (a) discipline and at recentering dominant representation of culture (despite all the changes in methodologies), what seems to be oddly suppressed in the notion of reflexivity in filmmaking is its practice as processes to prevent meaning from



From Naked Spaces - Living is Round. 1985.

ending with what is said and what is shown and—through inquiries into production relations—thereby to challenge representation itself even while emphasizing the reality of the experience of film as well as the important role that reality plays in the lives of the spectators.

Unless an image displaces itself from its natural state, it acquires no significance. Displacement cause resonance.

—Shanta Gokhale ²²

As an aesthetic closure or an old relativizing gambit in the process nonetheless of absolutizing meaning, reflexivity proves critically in/significant when it merely serves to refine and to further the accumulation of knowledge. No going beyond, no elsewhere-within-here seems possible if the reflection on oneself is not at one and the same time the analysis of established forms of the social that define one's limits. Thus to drive the self into an abyss is neither a moralistic stricture against oneself nor a task of critique that humanizes the decoding self but never challenges the very notion of self and decoder. Left intact in its positionality and its fundamental urge to decree meaning, the self conceived both as key and as transparent mediator, is more often than not likely to turn responsibility into license. The license to *name*, as though meaning presented itself to be deciphered without any ideological mediation. As though specifying a context can only result in the finalizing of what is shown and said. As though naming can stop the process of naming: that very abyss of the relation of self to self.

The bringing of the self into play necessarily exceeds the concern for human errors, for it cannot but involve as well the problem inherent in representation and communication. Radically plural in its scope, reflexivity is thus not a mere question of *rectifying* and *justifying* (*subjectivizing*). What is set in motion in its praxis are the self-generating links between different forms of reflexivity. Thus, a subject who points to him or herself as subject-in-process, a work that displays its own formal properties or its own constitution as work, is bound to upset one's sense of identity—the familiar distinction between the Same and the Other since the latter is no longer kept in a recognizable relation of dependence, derivation, or appropriation. The process of self-constitution is also that in which the self vacillates and loses its assurance. The paradox of such a process lies in its fundamental instability; an instability that brings forth the disorder inherent in every order. The “core” of representation is the reflexive

22. Shanta Gokhale, as quoted in Uma da Cunha, ed., *The New Generation, 1960-1980*, New Delhi, The Directorate of Film Festivals, 1981, p. 114.

interval. It is the place in which the play within the textual frame is a play on this very frame, hence on the borderlines of the textual and extra-textual, where a positioning within constantly incurs the risk of de-positioning, and where the work, never freed from historical and socio-political contexts nor entirely subjected to them, can only be itself by constantly risking being no-thing.

A work that reflects back on itself offers itself infinitely as nothing else but work . . . and void. Its gaze is at once an impulse that causes the work to fall apart (to return to the initial no-work-ness) and an ultimate gift to its constitution. A gift, by which the work is freed from the tyranny of meaning as well as from the omnipresence of a subject of meaning. To let go of the hold at the very moment when it is at its most effective is to allow the work to live, and to live on independently of the intended links, communicating itself in itself, like Benjamin's "the self is a text"—no more and no less "a project to be built."²³ *Orpheus' gaze . . . is the impulse of desire which shatters the song's destiny and concern, and in that inspired and unconcerned decision reaches the origin, consecrates the song.*²⁴

Meaning can neither be imposed nor denied. Although every film is in itself a form of ordering and closing, each closure can defy its own closure, opening onto other closures, thereby emphasizing the interval between apertures and creating a space in which meaning remains fascinated by what escapes and exceeds it. The necessity to let go of the notion of intentionality that dominates the question of the "social" as well as that of creativity cannot therefore be confused with the ideal of nonintervention, an ideal in relation to which the filmmaker, trying to become as invisible as possible in the process of producing meaning, promotes empathic subjectivity at the expense of critical inquiry even when the intention is to show and to condemn oppression. *It is idealist mystification to believe that 'truth' can be captured by the camera or that the conditions of a film's production (e.g., a film made collectively by women) can of itself reflect the conditions of its production. This is mere utopianism: new meaning has to be manufactured within the text of the film. . . . What the camera in fact grasps is the 'natural' world of the dominant ideology.*²⁵

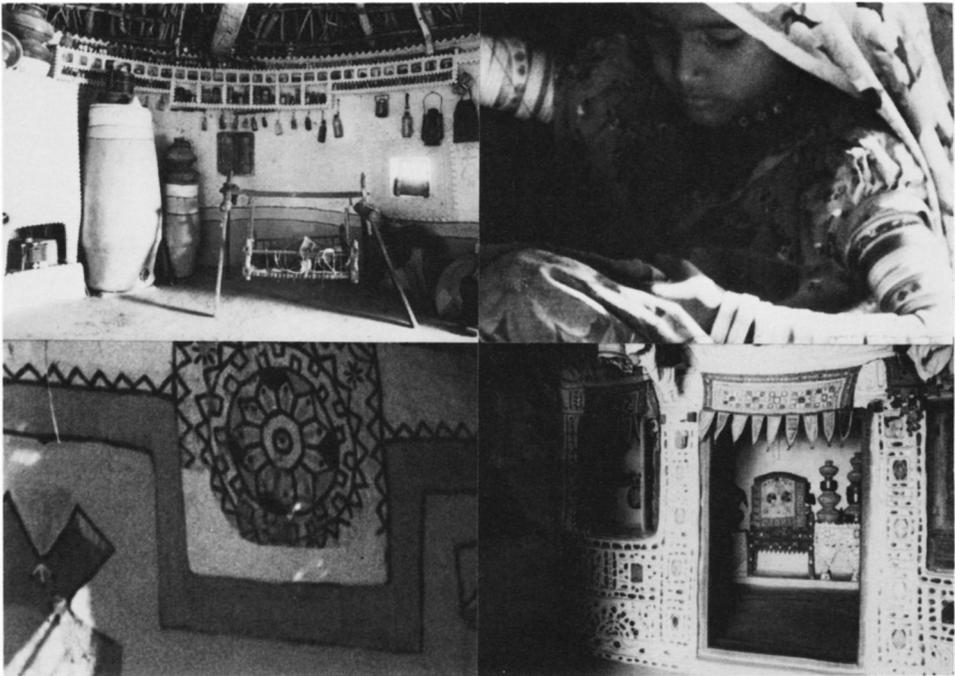
In the quest for totalized meaning and for knowledge-for-knowledge's sake, the worst meaning is meaninglessness. A Caucasian missionary nun based in a remote village of Africa qualifies her task in these simple, confident terms: "We are here to help people give meaning to their lives." Ownership is monotonously circular in its give-and-take demands. It is a monolithic view of the world the irrationality of which expresses itself in the imperative of both giving and meaning,

23. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, p. 14.

24. Maurice Blanchot, in P. Adams Sitney, ed., *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, trans. L. Davis, Tarrytown, New York, Station Hill Press, 1981, p. 104.

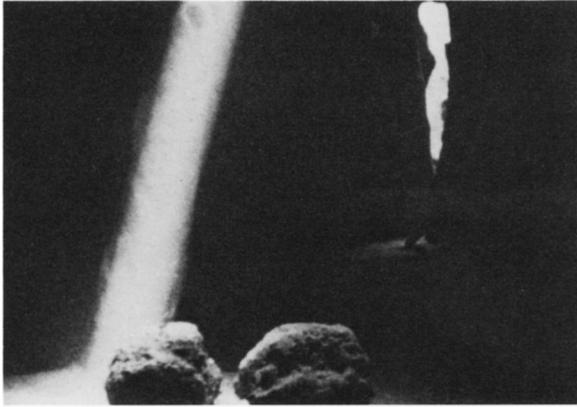
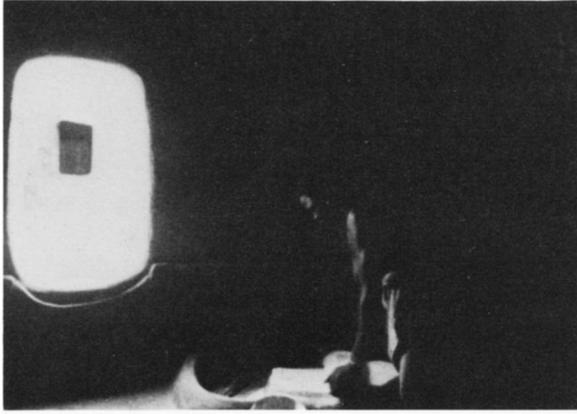
25. Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," p. 214.

and the irreality of which manifests itself in the need to require that visual and verbal constructs yield meaning down to their last detail. *The West moistens everything with meaning, like an authoritarian religion which imposes baptism on entire people.*²⁶ Yet such illusion is real; it has its own reality, one in which the subject of Knowledge, the subject of Vision, or the subject of Meaning continues to deploy established power relations, assuming Himself to be the basic reserve of reference in the totalizing quest for the referent, the true referent that lies out there in nature, in the dark, waiting patiently to be unveiled and deciphered correctly. To be redeemed. Perhaps then, an imagination that goes toward the texture of reality is one capable of working upon the illusion in question and the power it exerts. The production of one irreality upon the other and the play of non-sense (which is not mere meaninglessness) upon meaning may therefore help to relieve the basic referent of its occupation, for the present situation of critical inquiry seems much less one of attacking the illusion of reality as one of displacing and emptying out the establishment of totality.



From India. Work-in-Progress.

26. Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Hill & Wang, 1982, p. 70.



From Naked Spaces - Living is Round. 1985.