

**(NON)FICTION AND THE VIEWER:
RE-INTERPRETING THE DOCUMENTARY
FILM**

Tammy Stone

“Realism, anyway, is never exactly the same as reality, and in the cinema it is of necessity faked.” (Godard 185)

Only relatively recently has the documentary film become a subject for serious scrutiny by film theorists, critics and historians. Although the Lumière brothers, Vertov and Grierson are but few examples of a varying documentary tradition rooted in the earliest days of the cinema, it is in the last few years that the genre has entered a new realm for theoretical debate, illustrated in part by its being defined “a fiction (un)like any other.” From Grierson’s insistence for a “creative treatment of actuality” largely for didactic purposes, to the more recent variations of the documentary tradition – the *cinéma vérité* movement, the string-of-interview documentary, the self-reflexive documentary – at issue lie a number of concerns once primarily reserved for the cinema in general and now being applied specifically to the practice of documentary filmmaking. One consequence of this application is an expanded awareness of the less-than-clear distinction between fiction and documentary films, given the knowledge that in any form of cinema, there is necessarily a mediation between what is being filmed and its referent. Because the medium always comes between the world and the world depicted on screen, and because the viewer is (with possible exception) absent from the filming process and present only in that of the viewing, it becomes apparent that it is not at the level of the image that one can distinguish between fiction and documentary. That is to say, there is arguably nothing about the image itself that allows one to determine whether it has been drawn from life as such or drawn from a life created

specifically for the screen. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine in detail the perennially unresolved debates on representing reality, on whether or not there is, indeed, a “reality” to be captured, it will be assumed that any film, be it fiction or documentary, is by necessity constructed, that inherent in the filmmaking process is the need to shape, select, and therefore create the finished film. Using this as an underlying assumption that is not a signal of despair but a widely agreed upon phenomenon, and by examining several viewpoints on the viability of a documentary theory tradition, ranging from postmodernists and poststructuralists to their dissenters, it will become clear that there may be as many (sometimes overlapping) approaches to the study of documentary filmmaking as there are people, be they theorists, filmmakers or viewers. The unavoidable subjectivity involved in the creating and viewing experience becomes even more so a factor in light of the current shift in attention from the dangers of illusionism inherent in the cinema, toward the need to recognize the importance of the areas of cognition and perception. In calling attention to the inability of the image to “speak for itself” as a statement of “reality” and the problems inherent in trying to differentiate between fictive and documentary films (between *a* world and *the* world), it will be argued that it comes down to a matter of context; despite, and in fact partly due to documentary conventions we have grown used to, prior knowledge that *this is a documentary* might be the only way needed to recognize it as such.

This might seem, upon first reflection, to be a somewhat bleak diagnosis of the documentary tradition. However, it can, and should, be seen as a liberation. Audiences are not as naive as they were thought to have been at one time; in fact, it seems naive to assume that film viewers are swayed by the powers of the cinema and are automatically vulnerable to the ideologies seeping through the screen. It likewise seems naive to assume that, even with the knowledge they are watching a documentary, viewers will believe everything they see as “objectively” sought out, and therefore unequivocally true. If this is the case, if a healthy scepticism and savvy regarding the images on screen is not only a wish on the part of certain

film theorists but an epistemological fact within contemporary audiences, the current range of questions commonly asked regarding the documentary film must make a shift. This paper will attempt to address the direction that the shift should take, keeping in mind the already blurred distinction between fiction and documentary, by briefly examining the impact on viewer perception of fiction films that incorporate documentary conventions (newsreel footage and interviews, for example). Two films in particular, were chosen to this aim. French filmmaker Alain Resnais' first fiction film, 1959's *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, combines documentary footage with a fictive storyline to draw parallels between the horrors of forgetting the Hiroshima bombing and the horrors of forgetting a lost love. French Canadian filmmaker Anne Claire Poirier's 1979 film *Mourir a Tue Tete*, made for the NFB, examines the issue of rape using a complex, multiple-diegesis approach. Although the two films come from different countries and were made in different time periods, they have useful features in common. As will be discussed, both are about social issues, both include newsreel footage in what is primarily a fiction format, and both make implicit comments about the process of filmmaking as being a construct. Most notably, both have important implications for documentary filmmaking. The fact that they are known, and labelled as fiction films despite their messages about "real life" issues calls into question what it is about a documentary film that defines it as such as well as how a viewer perceives, and therefore distinguishes between the documentary and fictive elements. A re-examination of these two films from the perspective of implications for documentary filmmaking can be an instructive starting point in the changing of the common attitude toward the inevitability of subjectivity in the filmmaking process as something to avoid to one of, as Godard implicitly called for, willful acquiescence.

Realism, one of the primary aims of the documentary, must necessarily in film translate into a representation of reality, no matter how ambitious the realist filmmaker is. The two terms, and hence the claim made by documentary filmmakers to be "representing reality," are

paradoxical in that representation implies a series of aesthetic choices, while the term reality exists on an epistemological plane. Once it is understood that what appears on screen, precisely due to the camera and then the projector as tools for representation, can never equate with its referent in the outside world, one could put that knowledge aside to consider the relation between the image and referent. Bazin, in his well-known essay, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”, insists that the realistic capturing of an image can, and should be the goal of filmmaking:

“The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model.” (Bazin 14)

This somewhat idealistic view of the camera’s ability to record what is found in nature has been refuted again and again, from the semiotic approach of the image being rendered a mere (ideologically-ridden) sign of its referent to a more recent variation of that approach: the image as sign to be consumed in a consumerist society. But Bazin’s view has not been completely cast aside; through modification, and taking into consideration thoughts on film since the time of Bazin’s writings, it has become more applicable to a cynical contemporary society. Evan Cameron, in defending the existence of at least some aspects of the world that can be agreed upon by at least some people, sees the folly in claiming that nothing exists except in the minds of each individual. Using one of the Lumière shorts as an example, he demonstrates that there is a common-sense benefit in recognizing the relation between the images on screen and the objects\events filmed:

“Unlike some in the audience, Lumiere knew exactly what he was seeing. He knew, on the one hand, that he was focusing upon a screen whose surface was being variably illuminated by the intermittent light impinging upon it from the projector. He was therefore encountering an object in the room before him, the surface of the screen, under conditions of cinematic illumination. On the other hand, he knew that he was also encountering, and by

the same act of seeing, an event distinguishable from the former, for he was seeing, as well, a train pulling into a station and passengers disembarking onto a quay and exiting - the *same* train, station, passengers, quay and event that he had encountered some months before while filming them.” (Cameron 3)

At the level of spectatorship, however, and as Cameron points out, Lumière was viewing the short from a privileged standpoint, having “encountered” the actual event now being presented on screen. While he knew he was seeing *the* train he had previously encountered, the rest of the audience arguably knew they were all seeing *a* train pull into *a* station. Even this latter point must be qualified, which Cameron does by asserting that, “Although any of our beliefs may be false, the bulk of them must be true. Scepticism, therefore, is statistically impossible...the world itself must be pretty much the way we *and everyone else* believe it to be. (Cameron 12)

Whether or not this is indeed the case, the more pertinent question here revolves less around the philosophical inquiries about how we experience our world and more around how we, both as filmmakers and viewers, draw from the world to relate to its various representations on screen. And with regards to the documentary, which is by no means a homogenous genre, these representations are generally motivated by a desire to embrace “realism”. The term has been applied and theorized upon so often, and in so many different contexts – from Bazin advocating a cinema coming as close to reality as possible, to the Italian neo-realist movement, to the uses of sound and colour adding to the ‘realism’ of the world portrayed on screen (interestingly, all of these uses of the term apply to fiction film) – that it has become somewhat of an esoteric phenomenon, at once paradoxical and yet continually strived for by documentary filmmakers:

“The preliminary question that thereby arises is therefore whether we need a concept of realism at all in the first place. In my own view, it is the very instability of the concept that lends it its historical interest and significance: for no other aesthetic...includes the epistemological function in this central fashion (as in the cinema)” (parenthesis added). (Jameson 158)

To Jameson, echoing of the postmodernist scepticism about the existence of a unified reality and therefore of the cinema as an instrument for capturing whatever reality there may be, the very tools of technological representation render realism a mere “realism-effect”, necessarily becoming nothing more than an illusion of a purported reality. However, in seeking for the possibility of a viable form of documentary filmmaking, Jameson asserts that despite realism being reduced to a “realism-effect”, this effect can be a starting point in portraying a view of the world that can be grasped by the many. In other words, he takes the opposite stance of Cameron to reach very similar conclusions:

“...the ‘world’ realism produces in its demiurgic capacity must in other words somehow be grasped as a *false* world, but as one which is objectively false and not some mere appearance or figment (in which case its production by realism would reduce itself to little more than the projection of an illusory idea, a form of false consciousness, an ideology of a purely subjective kind).”
(Jameson 163)

While this is admirable attempt on Jameson’s part to allow for the existence of a documentary tradition, it is difficult to see why one would want to view a documentary that is inherently false, even if it is “objectively false” (Instead of each person individually experiencing a documentary that cannot possibly be about anything “real”, it is now the masses subject to the same incoherent riddle). Further on, however, Jameson notes that, objectivity about a true or false world aside, something important occurs in the act of filming that detracts from the ability to present the world as it might exist. “(Moving images) cannot ... be *translated* back into photography, but constitutively presuppose the inevitability of time and change and loss as the price they must pay to become events rather than things.” (Jameson 192) With this, Jameson calls attention to the matter of history, and of the inevitable consequences (primarily being distortion) of the retelling of events that have once occurred. Because documentary film is widely thought to be partly defined as a discourse drawn from the historical world, theories on historical discourse must therefore be considered, and have been applied to the practice of

documentary filmmaking.

One of the most often cited theorists on history, Hayden White, has insisted that the recording of history is naturally going to become a *re-writing*, or *re-thinking* of history, to the detriment of attaining a 'real' look at past events: "... the very claim to have discerned some kind of formal coherence in the historical record brings with it theories of the nature of the historical world and of historical knowledge itself which have ideological implications for attempts to understand 'the present', however this 'present' is defined." (White 21) White, like Jameson, is of the belief that history is not a text, but must be delivered through one; history cannot therefore come to the reader or viewer of a discourse on history without being mediated by a text that is necessarily narrativized, and hence shaped by any given contemporary mode of textualization (or trope, as White has labelled these modes of narrative discourse). Or put more simply by another realist sceptic, "... nonfiction contains any number of 'fictive' elements, moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention." (Renov 2) This meeting point between the fictive film and its documentary counterpart is precisely where the analysis of a viable documentary tradition should begin. Instead of submitting to the somewhat morbid outlooks of postmodernist sceptics on the inability of film to represent reality, and instead of rejecting these outlooks completely, as several more recent writings on documentary have done, it would rather be worthwhile to examine where the two ends of the theoretical spectrum meet, what commonalities can be found. For, by no means has one series of thoughts been completely replaced by another in a convenient chronology. Renov, in fact, in a recently published book, remains sceptical about the viability of recording actual truth, but at the same time acknowledges the advances being made in the field of documentary theory as worthy of pursuing:

"It may well be that the marginalization of the documentary film as a subject of serious inquiry is at an end. After all, the key questions which arise in the study of nonfiction film and video - the ontological status of the image, the epistemological states of

representation, the potentialities of historical discourse on film - are just as pressing for an understanding of fictional representation.” (Renov 1)

Renov draws on White to compound his argument that the documentary tradition, due to its inevitability of being a fictive work, is little more than a compilation of constructed, and therefore biased interpretations. “As Hayden White has so brilliantly described, ‘every mimesis can be shown to be distorted and can serve, therefore, as an occasion for yet another description of the same phenomenon.’” (Renov 7) What Renov and White perhaps fails to see are the fascinating possibilities that arise, and with important implications for the notion of bias, when “another description of the same phenomenon”, and yet another, become available in the general body of documentary works.

How then, to distinguish between documentary and fictive works? For, as Renov continued to say, “... there is nothing inherently less creative about nonfictional representations, both may create a ‘truth’ of a text.” (Renov 7) Or, as Jameson asked, “... how to escape from the image by means of the image?” (Jameson 162)

At risk of over-generalization, there is no answer to that question, at least in its most literal terms. There is nothing in the image itself that contextualizes it in either *a* world or *the* world. The Washington Monument is the Washington Monument and it is not dependent on its context within the rest of a film to be recognized as such. Viewer recognition becomes a factor, although this does not answer the question of how the viewer differentiates between the Washington Monument being used in a documentary about, say, Washington, or merely as a backdrop for a fiction film. Brian Winston, notes, in the same vein, that “... the documentary image now represents a reality no more and no less ‘real’ than the reality presented by the photographic image of, say, Michelle Pfeiffer or Gerard Depardieu.” (Winston 254) In other words, the “lies” of fiction can be easily confused with the “truths” of documentary subjects. For Winston, “What then is left for documentary is a relation to actuality which acknowledges the

normal circumstances of image production but is at the same time consonant with our everyday experience of the real.” (Winston 254) However, the very success of *fiction* films is, at least in part, dependent precisely on the ‘consonance’ between people’s life experiences with those portrayed on the screen; without this identification, people would be more than reluctant to keep ‘going to the movies.’ Furthermore, Winston’s call for a documentary which “acknowledges the normal circumstances of image production”, (the self-reflexive documentary) cannot possibly be at the same time consonant with our everyday reality, because that reality does not involve the presence of cinematic machinery. It would seem as though Winston is trying to guarantee a future for documentary while fundamentally believing that the genre is inherently incapable of being anything other than a fictive work. He does, however, make some fascinating comments on the future role of subjectivity in documentary filmmaking, which will be discussed later on.

It is largely undisputed, thus far, that the image is of necessity a phenomenon apart from, albeit arguably similar, to its referent. This argument goes at least as far back as Walter Benjamin’s well-cited assertion that the aura of all things natural is lost in the era of mechanical reproduction: “Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye - if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.” (Benjamin 677) It is also widely thought that documentaries, like fiction, are constructs. One does not have to look further than the credit sequences that accompany any fiction or documentary film to make this observation, regardless of the realist or formalist aspirations of the work. Or, as Cameron eloquently noted:

“Learning how to think rightly, and thus inquisitively, is learning how to *construct* rather than criticize; and since we can only construct something from elements already at hand, and hence already arranged into a world, it is to learn how to *reconstruct* a better world from a world we encounter rather than seeking the truth about it. The arts, therefore, are the models for science and philosophy, rather than the reverse, for they encompass the reconstructions of the world we most freely undertake.” (Cameron 14)

To Cameron, then, if everything in the world has already been arranged, and therefore constructed, another construction (such as a documentary) would not inevitably lead to a distortion; this belief is made evident in his insistence that art can be a model for science, which is so often associated with the terms “objectivity” and “empirical”. Along these lines of thought, film theorists have recently turned to a more pragmatic approach in defining, and hence giving a future to the documentary tradition; in other words, they have turned away from the hair-splitting concerns of the postmodernists and poststructuralists to insist on a number of ways documentary can be defined as such and hence distinguished from fiction.

Bill Nichols, in an essay published in *Movies and Methods, Volume II*, has traced the evolution of documentary practice, explaining why one given mode of discourse has been replaced by another over the history of documentary filmmaking. Briefly, he noted that the early, Griersonian style of direct-address, employing what has become known as a voice-of-God narration, and being blatantly didactic, fell out of favour during the World War II era to be replaced by the *cinéma vérité* movement. The movement, largely characterized by a sense of immediacy of capturing “untampered” events, as well as by the transparency of the filming process, lacked any kind of context in the historical world. The movement was followed by a return to direct address in the form of the interview. The series-of-interview style of documentary raises questions about the credibility of the interviewees, and of differentiating between “real life” subjects and fictive characters; however, this style is still largely used today. The fourth and most recent style, the self-reflexive documentary, foregrounds the filmmaking process and, according to Nichols, “... makes patently clear what has been implicit all along: documentaries always were forms of re-presentation, never clear windows onto ‘reality’.” (Nichols 260) Although he acknowledges that no one style of documentary will ever be the definitive, and hence ideal discourse based on actuality, he asserts that the self-reflexive documentary “... is, however, in the process of evolving alternatives that seem, in our present historical context, less obviously problematic than the strategies of commentary, *vérité*, or the

interview.” (Nichols 260) Nichols, as will be examined, seems to praise the self-reflexive documentary as an appeasement to postmodernists (who insist there is no reality and who therefore condone the filmic admission of construction) without looking at the arguably dangerous implications self-reflexivity could have for documentary filmmaking, which will be touched upon later on.

In his more comprehensive work on documentary, *Representing Reality*, Nichols puts forth the idea that although documentary is a fiction (albeit one that is (un)like any other) and is necessarily a not only a construct but a an inherently biased and ideological one (which he discusses at length in his 1981 book *Ideology and the Image*), it can be distinguished by other fictive works in that its material is drawn from *the* historical world, and a *shared* historical world at that (Nichols 160). But as Winston validly points out, “It is not the sharing that is critical here. After all, we ‘share’ the world depicted in any Western but that does not make it a representation of *the* world, the historical reality. It is not even that there are a multiplicity of fictional worlds but only one documentary one.” (Winston 252). Nichols also asserts that with the documentary, “It is a likeness rather than a replica to which we attend.” (Nichols 109) The natural question following this comment: how does the viewer perceive a “likeness” any differently than s/he does a “replica”? Does one not have to have prior knowledge that one is viewing a documentary and not a fiction film to appreciate the likeness as such? Nichols seems to be laying out the characteristics that are supposed to mark the documentary as distinguishable from fiction without touching the issue of whether what are *suggested* as theoretical characteristics of documentary can possibly be what viewers *perceive* in the act of viewing.

Another problematic claim made by Nichols concerns the subjects of both documentary and fiction films:

“Documentaries usually invite us to take as true what subjects recount about something that happened even if we also see how more than one perspective is possible...Fiction, though, often invites us to take what characters say about what happened as

suspect, more tightly circumscribed or restricted to the knowledge and perspective of a character...” (Nichols 21)

It could be argued, in stark contrast to what Nichols has proposed, that we do indeed take what fictional characters say to be true *within the context of their fictional setting*. Nichols has already acknowledged that documentaries, like fiction films, are indeed constructs; under this assumption, there is arguably no way of differentiating between the inherent “truth” of a fictive characters comments with that of a documentary subjects, given that they are both the “truths” of a given constructed text. Again, it becomes a matter of cognition. With the viewer aware that s/he is viewing a fiction film, the characters will be believable within the context of that film. With the knowledge that one is watching a documentary, however, the interviewees, or subjects, may in fact immediately become suspect as long as the viewer is aware that these subjects were chosen (selected) for the purpose of a particular documentary discourse. And whereas fictive characters are presented with the backstory to make them “whole”, “believable” characters, documentary subjects are usually presented to deliver words on a particular topic, without any other knowledge of who they are; thus, their credibility is arguably diminished. The fact that the world is a stage, and we are all actors, as Shakespeare once said, also takes on heightened significance in an age where it is becoming difficult to find anyone who is not camera happy and media savvy, and wise as to how to put on a performance.

What this brings us back to, then, is a general scepticism about the viability for documentaries to be, as completed packages, distinguishable from certain fictions (not all fictions, of course; it would take a lot of persuading, for example, to convince someone that *Jurassic Park* was a documentary on dinosaurs.) Like Nichols, two dissenters of postmodernist theory, Noel Carroll and Carl Plantinga, assert that the ability to define a documentary as such lies in its discursive function. However, they both disagree with Nichols’s insistent belief that objectivity is an impossible goal. Carroll claims that selection, while inevitable, does not guarantee bias and is not “incompatible with objectivity...determining bias in a particular film is

always an empirical matter and not the foregone conclusion of a piece of conceptual analysis.” (Carroll 284-5) While he makes a valid point in that not all documentary films give a blatantly one-sided view of a topic, and gives examples of documentaries he does not believe to be inherently political, as in the days of the Griersonian tradition, for example, he fails to suggest ways to negate the “foregone conclusion” of bias. His belief in the viability of objectivity, though, is significant in that it marks a pragmatic approach to documentary that becomes a more positive, and perhaps more useful outlook than Nichols’s assertion that attempts at objectivity inherently belie a hidden ideological and political agenda. However, Carroll (along with Plantinga) rejects postmodernist scepticism on the grounds that it seeks to bemoan a condition it believes to be somehow immune from and therefore capable of analysing, without acknowledging the possibility that the issues raised by postmodernists predate the postmodernist era. “...the illusion-realism equation is not quite so much the creature of the postmodernists as Carroll seems to suggest. It is far older ... Illusionism and realism, however much Carroll may regret it, go together particularly where lenses are involved, and always have.” (Winston 251) Even if the “illusion-realism equation” were to be temporarily put aside to allow for the consideration of the discursive function of documentary (making a persuasive argument about the historical world), it cannot be denied that the discourses of documentary in general are so varied, and within styles that are so varied, that this function alone cannot distinguish documentary from fiction. (And this is without considering the obvious problem of fictive elements, such as re-enactments, appearing in documentary film.) Fortunately, and this is of key importance, accompanying the varied documentary styles are the conventions that viewers have come to recognize as being distinctly “documentary styles”; this fact, as will be shown, might prove to have fundamental implications for the genre.

Carl Plantinga, like Carroll, believes that postmodernists and poststructuralists (like Renov and White) are self-defeating in their despair and that they have made their claims with insufficient knowledge of philosophy. In denying the inherent powers of the cinematic apparatus,

Plantinga suggests an instrumentalist approach to documentary, thereby giving a name to a viewpoint agreed upon by Carroll:

“The instrumentalist...does not assume that the documentary hides its rhetorical purposes, or that spectators necessarily mistake what they see for the truth; the instrumentalist examines rhetoric not as a necessary deception (though it may be deceptive), but as the age-old use of discourse for persuasion.” (Plantinga 311)

For Plantinga, then, the fatal error on the part of postmodernists and poststructuralists is that they look at rhetoric as being necessarily deceptive instead of regarding it as an “age-old” discursive method for presenting what he acknowledges to be the *filmmaker’s* truth. However, he himself admitted in parentheses that the rhetoric *may* be deceptive, and he acknowledges that is only one truth, and not the Truth, presented in any given discourse. These vagaries undermine the ability believe, along with Plantinga, that there is a way to determine which documentaries are deceptive and which are not, if this is even the important question to be asking. He also claims that “The instrumentalist affirms the potential of moving photographs to provide visual information about a scene or event, while simultaneously acknowledging weaknesses of the image as a vehicle for conceptual knowledge or analysis.” (Plantinga 319). It seems very difficult to believe that moving images have the capacity to say all that just by virtue of being projected on the screen; rather, Plantinga may be transferring to the moving image those thoughts and desires, born in isolation and indeed far removed from, what he admirably feels the image should be conveying. It is, of course, arguably in the power of the self-reflexive documentary to make an implicit statement on the construction of film, and hence of meaning, but it will be shown that this is not likely an effective alternative for the documentary practice.

What then, is an effective alternative? If the goal of documentary is to present a “truth” about the world as it would have existed in the absence of the camera, as one ethnographic filmmaker hypothesized, “... there is of course no real need for the making of films, but merely for the collection of footage upon which a variety of studies can later be used.” (MacDougall

279). And even with this minimal goal of collecting data, “A few images create a world. We ignore the images that could have been, but weren’t. In most cases, we have no conception of what they might be.” (MacDougall 281) By referring to the inevitable process of selection, MacDougall calls for a version of the self-reflexive documentary: what he calls a participatory documentary. In other words, he insists that once the camera is in a given environment, it becomes a part of that situational reality, and to deny that fact would be a distortion; if the filmmaker interacts with his subjects, on the other hand, s/he can create a film taking into account the new situational reality. However, in “participating” in the action of the film, the filmmaker is simply recording a new “reality” that would never have existed without the filmmaker’s participation, and that is arguably far removed from the original aspirations for an ethnographic film.

If the aim of documentary filmmaking is not simply to collect data on a given population or event, but to deliver a message within a particular discourse and drawn from the historical world, self-reflexivity does not provide a viable alternative to the other styles of documentary which are widely thought to be either “fictive\illusory” or “inherently selective and therefore biased.” Postmodernists and poststructuralists claim that, given the illusionism of all that appears on screen, acknowledging the process of construction is a means of “saving” the documentary: “The film or videotape that considers its own processes rather than seals over every gap of a never-seamless discourse is more likely to engender the healthy scepticism that begets knowledge, offering itself as a model.” (Renov 31) Nichols agrees that the self-reflexive documentary is less “problematic” than other documentary styles in that it pre-empts accusations of bias by showing itself to be a construct. In other words, self-reflexivity is to the postmodernists the lesser of two evils while for Nichols it is a way to avoid the hiding of the processes of construction while continuing to allow for the viability of documentary by virtue of its being drawn from *the* historical world.

Carroll questions Nichols's call for self-reflexivity: the interest in formal, or aesthetic concerns should be neglected in favour of what he considers to be an attainable, straightforward objectivity. (Carroll 293) However, it is not the formal quality of self-reflexivity in film that limits its advantages to documentary practice; rather, its primary disadvantage lies in its implications on how we perceive, and therefore make meaning of the world. The self-reflexive mode of address foregrounds the fact that the world, history, and representations of both are constructs. If we have already made this assumption on constructs, and it has been argued that we have, then what does self-reflexivity add to filmic representation? In other words, a non-self-reflexive documentary can seek to make a statement on an event or an issue drawn from the historical world; whether it makes overt claims of being objective, or unbiased is irrelevant in that a unified view is being presented. It is then up to the viewer to determine whether or not to counter this view; it is being suggested that it is within the capabilities of contemporary audiences to know that it is *one* viewpoint and not *the* viewpoint being presented. Self-reflexive documentaries, on the other hand, make no claim other than that there is no reality and no possibility of "discovering" or recording anything other than a series of unanswerable questions. (It has also been asserted that self-reflexive techniques cannot in themselves "show processes of construction" since images cannot "show" concepts, but merely objects.) Once a documentary begins to reflect on itself as being a construct, the implication is that there is nothing left in the historical world upon which to reflect, nothing it can attempt to historicize. It may even be suggested, to grasp at an extreme consequence, that if only self-reflexive documentaries were made, it would be the virtual end of documentary filmmaking, due to the fact that there would no longer be any viewpoints on any issues to examine or counter. Following this line of thought, and using AIDS as an example of a topic for documentary application: might it not be more useful to have several coherent, and even overtly biased documentaries made on AIDS (a look at clinical treatment, a statement on personal horrors on suffering from AIDS, a view of some of the possible lifestyles some believe to lead to the contraction of the disease), allowing for the

viewer to align him/herself with any of several of them, than to have one self-reflexive documentary that necessarily foregrounds only the fact that it can reach no conclusions? It again becomes a matter of trusting the viewer to know s/he is a) watching a documentary that is b) of the filmmaker's creation; once we can do this, we can allow documentary filmmakers to take a step back from the cynical stance that there is no way to make meaning of the world, in order to make documentaries about topics other than itself. But nor should they be resorted to seeking out the best methods of appearing to present an "objective" discourse:

"That a work undertaking some manner of historical documentation renders that representation in a challenging or innovative manner should in no way disqualify it as nonfiction because the question of expressivity is, in all events, a matter of degree." (Renov 35)

Renov, while insisting on the impossibility of divorcing the aesthetic and didactic qualities of the documentary film, maintains that it would be useful to take advantage of "expressivity", perhaps to heighten the emotional impact of the message. Nichols, in fact, makes a similar argument for the benefit of the emotional enhancement, or the "empathy value" of the message to justify the appearance of "emotional\subjective point of view\re-enactments\fictive" elements that appear in the documentary film. (Nichols 165) Taken to the next step however, one might ask how a viewer would benefit any less from watching a well-researched fictive work on a given topic than from viewing a documentary on the same topic "drawn from the historical world."

The distinction between fiction and documentary is becoming increasingly blurred; we already know this. In an age of rapidly advancing technology, even the image itself, now capable of being manipulated digitally, has become farther removed from nature than Benjamin could ever have anticipated. It is also significant that "... in the wake of countless TV ads which trade on their documentary 'look' (shaky camera, grainy, black-and-white) – the technically flawed depiction of a purported reality no longer suffices as visual guarantee of authenticity. It is simply

understood as another artifice.” (Renov 23) The key point, as Renov notes, is that the deceptions (as he sees them) are *understood* by viewers. They are aware of the conventions of various documentary styles, and can use them not only to make meaning of moving images, but to understand the process of selection that went into the filmmaker’s decision to use these conventions. Starting with, and applying this system of understanding conventions to the two fiction films *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour* and *Mourir a Tue Tete*, it will be suggested that a hybrid of postmodernist and what we can call post-postmodernist thought may lead to an acceptance for, and even an emphasis on “subjectivity” in the documentary film.

“... we typically view a film while knowing that it has been indexed, either as fiction or nonfiction. The particular indexing of a film mobilizes expectations and activities on the part of the viewer. A film indexed as nonfiction leads the spectator to expect a discourse that make assertions or implications about actuality ... Indexing is a process initially begun by the filmmaker, but to function normally, it must be ‘taken up’ by the discursive community.” (Plantinga 310-1)

Plantinga continues to point out the problems of indexing being a social construct, leading to the possibility of its misleading viewers (he cites *The Thin Blue Line* and *Roger and Me* as examples of films labelled as fiction but that are discourses about the actual events). It is still important, however, to be aware that people go into the viewing of a film with preconceived notions of what they are about to watch. A consequence of this is that documentary filmmakers can assume viewers will be prepared to watch a discourse taken from actuality, and feel free to be creative in the telling. “Documentary must abandon its limited, and always serious, tone. It must cease to be always and only one of Nichols’s ‘discourses of sobriety.’ ... The time has come to liberate documentary from this spurious position and admit it as a species of editorializing *in its essence*.” (Winston 255)

This is a viable possibility now more than ever; in the age of the 500-channel universe, it would be difficult to argue that audiences do not know they are being presented with a multiplicity of viewpoints on any range of subjects. In fact, it would be to undermine viewers’

intelligence not to grant them the option of choosing what or what not to absorb from their environment, including selected material from the films they view. A brief analysis *Hiroshima* and *Mourir* will demonstrate that knowledge about “real” issues is attainable from films classified as fiction, and that due to prior knowledge of documentary conventions, the “reality” can be weeded out from the fictive elements of the fiction or documentary so that, fictive elements aside, the viewer can come out with the message (which is arguably the most important aspect of a documentary to be derived). The logical consequence of this, that the documentary form itself can be liberated from the necessity to pursue “standards of objectivity” (Nichols’s “discourse of sobriety”), is a door open wide to new possibilities.

Both *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour* and *Mourir a Tue Tete* are labelled as fiction films, and yet it is indisputable that neither fall into the category of being classical narrative discourses of a homogenous, imaginary world. *Hiroshima*, Resnais’ first film that is not classified as a documentary, in fact started out as a documentary project on the Hiroshima bombings. But the addition of the love story by no means renders the film purely fictive; to say that would be to believe there might not have been a Hiroshima bombing in the world=s history. It would be fair to assume, however, and perhaps it must be assumed, that anyone watching the film is aware of the catastrophic end to the second World War. (It is beyond the scope of this paper to look at cross-cultural aspects of spectatorship and their implications on epistemology):

“(Metz’s) ‘extra-iconic’ context therefore largely determines the kind of realism a film is thought to present. For instance, the newsreel footage Resnais uses as pro-filmic event is read as newsreel, i.e. unmodified, ‘real’, because the content of those images corresponds to those other visual and non-visual sources established as true documentation of that historical event.” (Hanet 61)

However, Resnais does not always make clear distinctions between “fictive” and “real” in the film. It seems, in fact, to be one of his purposes to question how we make meaning or sense of the world. In the opening dialogue between the male and female characters of the film,

the woman says, “I believe that the art of seeing has to be learned.” But as she herself testifies in that same conversation, parts of it *have* been learned. In other words, contemporary audiences have grown used to certain documentary conventions:

“(Hiroshima’s) fate is a true historical event, whose ‘image’, documented by various media (newspapers, photographs, books, films), constitutes part of the cultural knowledge (i.e. extra-iconic context) the viewer refers to when reading this sequence. This extra-iconic context, moreover, enables the viewer to establish that the images showing the after-effects of the bomb are not realistic, but ‘real’.” (Hanet 63)

Although several of these conventions may have grown to be “outdated”, and have become subject to use for fictive ends, they remain unequivocally recognized as documentary styles. Just as *Hiroshima*’s female character exclaims “I did see the newsreels, I didn’t invent it”, the audience becomes privy to the knowledge they are viewing stock footage Resnais inserts into his film. And either because this footage has been seen before by viewers, or because it has a grainier, differentiating look than the footage shot specifically for the film, audiences can combine prior knowledge of the bombing with knowledge of what newsreels look like to segregate those elements of the film.

However, Resnais evocatively makes us question the way we make meaning and the viability of knowing anything to be “real”. The male character tells the female she has invented everything she claims to know about Hiroshima; this beginning conversation occurs as a voiceover to what we recognize to be stock footage from the war and we have not yet seen the characters. (Except for close ups of their body parts that we arguably recognize as such because we have learned by viewing narratives to associate the voices heard with the images seen, and then because of their contrasting film quality from the newsreel footage.) Most notable, however, is the film-within-the-film. The female character plays an actress visiting Hiroshima who is playing a nurse in a film about peace. Whereas some of the opening sequence newsreel footage contained images of burned and scarred victims of the bombing, Resnais shows the make-up

artists of the film-within-the-film applying the same kind of burned look on the actor-victims. These shots cannot help but have the effect of making viewers question whether or not the earlier footage had been similarly created for the film.

Question-evoking images about the nature of reality/fiction as portrayed in film abound. Just as the Washington Monument was earlier mentioned under the claim that “an image is an image unless put into any number of contexts”, shots of the female’s home town of Nevers, France, are shown at various points of the film, either as establishing shots as she describes it to the male, or as part of “re-enactments” of her wartime love story. However, the images of the Nevers countryside could have been selected from newsreel footage or shot at the time of filmmaking; as has been established, there is nothing in the image itself (especially in the case of *Hiroshima*, which is done in black-and-white and is of a lesser quality film stock due to the age of the film) that does not depend on context for the creation of its meaning. But the notion of meaning being a construction is precisely the point. The viewer of *Hiroshima* undoubtedly comes away from this film with the knowledge that s/he has been presented with a coherent message about the bombing: that there is a horrifying possibility of forgetting an important historical event. The narrative storyline does not take away from, but rather emphasizes, this message. It is not, as Hanet ultimately suggests, reduced to a question of ideology/manipulation on the part of the filmmaker and the viewer, where the viewer “... erroneously believes the ‘camera does not lie’.” (Hanet 65) And in documentary, too, viewers can apply knowledge of conventions to assure themselves they are watching a discourse on actuality, and hence know that the message drawn, *albeit a knowingly constructed one*, is relevant as a statement of something that is part of their world and history.

Mourir a Tue Tete, similarly, serves to illustrate that a (created) construct about an issue can be just as compelling, and thus useful, as a documentary striving only to “present the facts”. *Mourir* is a complex film: it is a fiction about two filmmakers making a documentary about rape; it is eventually revealed that the subject of the documentary-within-the-film is an actress playing

the rape victim. While it is difficult to keep track of the multiple levels of discourse throughout the film, one instead, by necessity perhaps, simply watches the various sequences as they unfold (and it is important to keep in mind that this is how films are viewed: one sequence at a time. This is why documentary conventions are recognized and usefully perceived with such immediate force). The most powerful sequence of *Mourir*, the rape sequence, is an extremely long take of a rape, shot from the viewpoint of the victim, whose face we rarely see throughout the sequence. The obvious message manifesting itself through this technique is that rape can happen to anyone. Because audiences have prior knowledge about what rape is, and would certainly know of instances where rape has occurred in actuality, it is not illogical to assume that audiences can identify with the images on screen; whether this filmic rape has really occurred or not becomes irrelevant. Poirier is not trying to tell us that *this rape happened*; she is using it as part of a message that rape in general can have horrific consequences.

The multiple levels of discourse presented in *Mourir* negate the possibility that Poirier desires to demonstrate that there is only one way examining the rape issue. She has her two fictional documentary filmmakers argue about the ending of their film; we can derive from this that there are any number of ways to approach the issue of rape. However, Poirier has her own discourse to present, and she in part uses newsreel footage to deliver her message. As with *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, Poirier can rely on viewer recognition of newsreel footage to avoid the problem of misleading audiences. From the black-and-white stock footage of the female Holocaust victims having their heads shaved, to the grainy, poor colour-quality of the little African girls undergoing a clitoris-removing ritual, viewers cannot help but to distinguish these shots from those of the rest of the film. This is precisely where postmodernist/poststructuralist fears about the illusions inherent in any cinematic image necessarily fall apart; we can, and we must, rely on the obvious visual discrepancies of the shots, and of our prior knowledge of the Holocaust and of ethnographic footage to avoid the despair of being misled by everything we see on screen. For bias does not have to equate with being misled; *Mourir* is indeed biased: viewers

may choose to agree or disagree with the parallels Poirier makes between clitoris-removal/Holocaust victims and rape. The point is that Poirier's subjectivity has given us a distinct and compelling message from which we *can* make a choice of agreement. And as an application to documentary filmmaking, what more can we ask, as world-weary consumers of discourses on the now unattainable historical event (and any event, once filmed, has become a part of history) than for the ability to make choices?

“When the real is fragmented as a result of being permeated with machines, the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity, or between the observer and the observed, vanishes. The machines used by the filmmaker can no longer be regarded as tools to manipulate reality from a distance, for there no longer is any distance...Fragmentation and construction are not modes of representation, but processes of the real itself.” (Shriver 40)

Postmodernists and poststructuralists, by no means a vanished body of thinkers, insist that there is no reality, and that any form of representation will inevitably be an illusion of something that does not even exist. Documentary, therefore, cannot be anything other than another form of fiction. Truth itself, according to Renov, “... it has been supposed, depends on fiction finding its shape and substance through the agency of human invention.” (Renov 10) Given the inescapability of an illusory line between documentary and fiction, Winston suggests that, “Most important, since the audience's understanding that what is on offer is indeed a truly subjective interaction with the world - one, unlike direct cinemas, unburdened by objectivity and actuality - what is on offer can be really ‘creatively treated’.” (Winston 254) However significant the postmodernist “solution” of a call for creativity might be, it has been founded on an underlying assumption irrelevant to theoretical debate on documentary filmmaking. It will arguably never be discovered what reality exists and to what extent we are all living in a world that masks hidden ideologies at every level of institution and representation. Instead we must look at what we *can* know, and this is where it is useful to take the postmodernist suggestion for the “artful documentary” and combine it with a pragmatic approach: the belief that audiences are

not naive and are not being deluded every step of the way. Self-reflexivity, it has been argued, reduces the documentary to asking questions about itself instead of about the world. If contemporary documentarians can assume that audiences a) know they are watching a documentary, b) can recognize documentary conventions, and c) realize that any film, documentary or otherwise, is inevitably a construct but not necessarily one drawn from an imaginary world, then perhaps viewer perception is the dependent factor for the useful effects a documentary can have. But this is not said with resignation. If subjectivity is inherent in any film, if the self-reflexive mode of address is self-defeating and if not all documentaries are overtly ideological\political (and, even if they are, will not be perceived by viewers as such), it seems as though “audience savvy” can help documentary practice make a shift. Documentary filmmakers can turn from struggling with or claiming objectivity to dealing with the desire to deliver a message – creative freedom made possible because the very existence of a documentary history grants viewers the ability to recognize documentary as (selectively) drawn from history, and to choose their own beliefs from there.

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