

The Documentary and the Production of Meaning

An assessment of the possibilities and limitations of representationalist ideas in documentary theory and practice.

Thesis presented to the examination committee of the University of Utrecht, to earn a bachelor's degree in Communication.

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4th period 2011

24 June 2011

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1. Introduction

The idea of representation can be seen almost as a default function of Western thought, the documentary as the visual pinnacle of this mode of reasoning. The documentary tradition, although constantly challenged, still carries in itself the promise of objective representation. As a result it has been used for propagandist and idealist goals alike. It has also shown to be a popular tool for addressing social issues, particularly to give the unheard a voice. It is tightly bound up with cultural anthropological practices and from the beginning of portable video equipment the documenting camera was a common companion on the trips of predominantly Western people, who travelled the 'rest' of the world. Within this representationalist framework power relations between the subject and the object are formed and often left unchallenged, whether consciously or unconsciously. Documentary makers and theorists have become increasingly aware of this problem and have tried to expose the power relationships without letting go of the idea of a documentary text altogether. More recent theories and approaches have argued that we need to move beyond ideas of representation by working with different models of communication¹. Yet the documentary tradition shows that its ties to the structuralist mode of thinking are still strong. This essay explores the extent to which the representational model of communication can function as a theoretical framework in the analyses of modern day documentaries with a postcolonial theme. We will find that sometimes the filmmakers' attempts at resistance move beyond the idea of representation. Even though this will be noted it will only serve as a direction for further research, it is otherwise beyond the scope of this essay.

To explore the possibilities and limitations discussed above, chapter one will try to come up with a workable definition of postcolonialism and deal with some of the dominant theories from within the postcolonial field of study, mainly focusing on theories of representation. Next a description will follow of why documentary discourse in its development has become so closely connected to ideas of representation. This chapter will also show the overall, threefold approach to documentary in the rest of the essay. In chapter four a single case from the documentary field will follow to illustrate what resistance might look like in practice and to what extent it succeeds in its endeavor. This chapter is thoroughly qualitative in its approach and will deal with the material in an exemplary fashion. The final chapter will draw some conclusions based on the

¹ Models in which perception is reconceptualised with a strong focus on the body. For example Erin Mannings 'Politics of Touch' (*Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) and Mark Hanssen's 'Affect-Body' (*New Philosophy for New Media*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004).

observations made in the previous chapters and will give suggestions for further research.

2. Representation within the discursive field of Postcolonialism

Ponzanesi acknowledges that “[p]ostcolonialism is an interdisciplinary field of studies that is not characterized by a cohesive set of theories and methods (88).” Yet she comes up with a basic definition of postcolonialism as that which studies and interrogates “the ongoing legacies and discursive operations of Empire”, but also in historical terms as referring to the period of independence after colonization. Even though concise, Ponzanesi’s approach does not quite do justice to a very complex phenomenon. Frank Schulze-Engler, in his article *Exceptionalist Temptations; Disciplinary Constraints: Postcolonial Theory and Criticism*, discerns at least five usages of postcolonial (290). The first refers to a specific theoretical orientation and is often identified with the ‘big three,’ Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha. The second usage refers simply to a certain part of the planet, and as such falls into the same category as terms like ‘The Third World’ and ‘Commonwealth’. The third refers to an ideological and political point of view. It includes an amount of anti-colonist, nationalist and anti-capitalist notions of third World Liberation. The fourth usage refers to a new interdisciplinary field, which boundaries are yet to be defined. The last way of using the term we mainly see outside of the scholarly field in popular discourse. It eludes any attempt at a precise definition and simply takes postcolonial to be anything that has something to do with postcolonialism. In this essay the term will mainly be used to refer to a field of study that evolved from the previously mentioned ‘big three’ because it is this notion that will be most helpful in understanding what postcolonial resistance can look like in documentaries. In the rest of this chapter I will discuss some of the most common theories on representation that flow from the postcolonial field of study.

Edward Said is often seen as the beginning of what is now called postcolonial theory. His book *Orientalism* used both Foucault’s idea of knowledge and power and Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, “by combining the analysis of political colonial dynamics with representational issues” (Ponzanesi, 89). Said claims that Western scholarship on the Orient is what has the biggest impact on the relationship between the two, not the much more obvious military oppression of the colonized. He mentions the idea of representation and argues that it can never be exactly realistic, there can only be constructed images that need to be interrogated for their ideological content (Said, 21).

Spivak’s analysis of the idea of representation is more detailed through its

engagement with postmodern philosophy. Following Marx she discerns representation as '*Darstellung*' and '*Vertretung*', the first referring to representation as "speaking for," the way it is done in politics, and the second as "re-representation," as in art or philosophy (1999, 256). From Spivak's analysis of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire* follows that theories of ideology must consider and engage both forms of representation. It is between these two processes of representation that the problem of the subaltern becomes visible. (Birla, 91). Spivak engages with deconstructionist philosophers like Deleuze and Foucault. She quotes Deleuze: "There is no more representation; there's nothing but action"- "action of theory and action of practice which relate to each other as relays and form networks" (FD 206-207)." (in Spivak, 2010: 28)." Spivak then argues that Deleuze here makes a valid statement about the inability to discern any strict boundaries between theory and action. She finds though that he overlooks the previously mentioned distinction between the two types of representation. When Deleuze and also Foucault claim that there is only action, they "invest in the reality of the experience of the oppressed" (Birla, 90). Spivak summarizes the results of the Foucault-Deleuze conversation: "there is no representation, no signifier [...]; theory is relay of practice [...] and the oppressed can know and speak for themselves." Thus the focus on action and theory as two distinct, although intertwined phenomena is vital according to Spivak because "running them together, especially in order to say that beyond both is where oppressed subjects speak, act, and know for themselves, leads to an essentialist, utopian politics" (1999, 259). In looking at documentaries later on we will see that both realms of representation play a role.

Spivak concludes that the subaltern cannot speak (Spivak, 1988: 308). She takes the example of Indian, Hindu women, whose voices are muted by both their patriarchal societies and by the British colonial ideology that sees them as victims of a barbaric culture. These people can only be spoken for. Spivak suggests that this is the task of Western intellectuals, especially feminist scholars (1988, 308). Well aware of the problematic status of their attempts they have a duty in bringing the position of the subaltern to the fore. In order to do so they need to take into account the aesthetic dimension (*Vertretung*) of political representation (*Darstellung*).

In short we could say that the subaltern are those who cannot speak, and as soon as they do, they are no longer subaltern in the strict sense of the word. However, this does leave us with a problem of definition: what does it mean to speak? And what does it mean to speak for? In discussing the documentary we will find that the distinction between the two is not always that clear.

3. The documentary as a representational tool: history and theory²

Ontology

The rise of the documentary tradition shows strong ties with what can be called the ontology of the photographic or filmic image. Although we must avoid technological determinism, a clear understanding of the workings of the camera does offer us a valuable insight into much of today's documentary practice.

Bazin describes the photograph as different from painting because of what he calls its 'essential objectivity' (15). He argues that the photograph in its essence is much like a fingerprint and as such is a part of the physical existence of the photographed object and can be taken as evidence of that which happened in a certain time and place (18). In terms of De Saussure's semiotics: the relationship between the photographic signifier and its signified is direct, physical and indexical. Although Bazin's idea of the object is more material than De Saussure's signified, we can still discern the same structuralist approach. Winston also refers to the objective qualities of the photograph. He argues that this is the result of the political and scientific context photography was embedded in after its discovery in the nineteenth century. The French government was considering the purchase of Daguerre's patents on photography, the main argument that was made by the advocates of this purchase, was that photography fell into the category of scientific instruments (Winston, 37). As a result of this the images produced by the photographic process were seen as objective, just as the measurements produced by for example a thermometer were seen as an objective capture of the temperature. The idea of indexicality explains why in the documentary tradition a lot of value has been attached to the usage of archival footage. The image is seen as evidence, the camera or maker as a witness, in what Nichols calls 'a legal representation of facts' (1993, 176).

Even though our daily viewing practice is still to a large extent defined by the idea of indexicality, there are some problems with this idea. First, fictional works also use the result of photographic process and as such are a result of the profilmic. Yet the discourses surrounding fiction and non-fiction are hugely different on a great number of aspects. The second problem is that within documentary it is common practice to work with reconstructions, normally explicitly presented as such, but this is not necessarily the case. It has created an awareness in the viewer that the profilmic never really was 'proof' of the argument a documentary was making, but rather of the uninterpreted object shown. This particular, singular instance of an object is within the documentary tradition often seen as an illustration of the general. A further problem is that film

² This chapter contains sections that are loosely based on an unpublished essay which I wrote for the course Fact and Fiction on the University of Utrecht.

functions different from photograph. It requires us to consider the relationships between each individual frame and also, on the level of editing, between different scenes. This automatically leads the viewer to negotiate meaning. The last problem I will mention here is the challenge that the so called 'digital age' presents photographic imagery with. Digitally enhanced and manipulated images are rapidly becoming more (photo)realistic. As a consequence photographic reality is being questioned even more. These days it can be both the result of an indexical photographic process and of the symbolic process of programming and algorithm. This last problem leads people to believe that we live in a radically new 'digital era' which calls for a new approach. Hight, describing this new era, challenges documentary theorists to "revisit, reconceptualize and clarify those things that make 'documentary' distinctive from other kinds of symbolic forms. [...] The challenge is ultimately to either redefine 'documentary' itself or abandon a collective term in favor of identifying a number of distinct practices (Hight, 6)." In the remainder of this chapter we will see that there is in fact room for both.

Another ontological feature of the documentary that needs brief mention is the fact that (most) camera's need to be aimed at an object and by doing so are turned away from the subject. Directional microphones have a similar effect on what can be heard. In feminist and postcolonial literature this effect is often referred to as the gaze (Smelik, 180), in which the subject-object relationship is never symmetrical or neutral.

We cannot argue that these things mentioned are what really defines a documentary. But it is precisely this complex discursive field that has been a part of the documentary tradition from the beginning that seems to have given documentary makers the very tools to work with. We will see how each of these elements still plays an important role in the way in which reception and interpretation take place. It is an echo of the photographic regime (or landscape, as Rodowick (2007) would call it) that still gives shape to our perception.

Intention

Another common approach to defining a documentary is to refer to the intention of the author. The question then is whether or not the author makes a truth-claim, it be explicit or implicit. Searle for example shows how internal and formal elements do not make a work fictional or non-fictional for reasons we have in part covered above. He argues that the discernment can only be made by looking at the intention of the author. Using the vocabulary of Speech Act theory he claims that in a work of fiction the illocutionary act is pretended, but the utterance act is real (Searle, 273). In non-fictional texts (among which the documentary) he sees serious assertions, or serious speech acts as the dominant mode of address.

However, a serious speech act can be conveyed *by* a text without it being visible *in* the text, for instance the moral of a fictional story (Searle, 332). The biggest problem we face here is that we normally do not have access to the intention of the author, or that the author can hide his actual intentions or even lie about them. This point is well made by the many mockumentaries we see especially in recent decades. The concepts of 'truth' and 'reality' have over the last century been responded to with increasing skepticism due to deconstructionist philosophy. Still, we must acknowledge that in (at least popular) discourse surrounding documentaries a constant question is whether what the makers claim is true, or does justice to reality. This is also suggested by Nichols when he calls confidence in what is said to the viewer "another default function of documentary" (1993, 178).

Reception

It is mentioned confidence that leads us to an approach in which the perception of readers is put at the heart of what ultimately defines a documentary. Eitzen writes about documentary as "a Mode of Reception" (1995). He argues that as soon as an audience is asking the question 'might it be lying?' we can safely assume that the work watched is working like a documentary (Eitzen, 98). Eitzen acknowledges that this might make it difficult for us to come up with a neat definition, but according to him it is not necessary to absolutely define that which he calls 'a rather indefinite body of texts'.

What makes this body indefinite is probably the fact that the domains of fiction and documentary are "enmeshed in one another (...). At the level of the sign, it is the differing historical status of the referent that distinguishes documentary from its fictional counterpart not the formal relations among signifier, signified, and referent." (Renov, 2). Odin describes the commonalities between documentary and fiction by referring to the fact that documentary is not unique in the reference it makes to reality. A western, when shown for example to an African audience, is to them a documentary of dress, landscape and conduct in a different society (Odin, 263). Odin comes with what he calls the semio-pragmatic approach. He introduces the idea of two modes of reading, a *lecture documentarisante* (a documentarising reading) and a *lecture fictivisante* (a fictivising reading), as two possible processes that can take place on the part of the reader (Odin, 266). As soon as a reader is aware of the existence of a maker, or rather an *enonciateur* (because this allows for a broader range of sources constructed by the reader, such as the camera, the producer, the director, a society, etc.), a *lecture documentarisante* is at work. Odin persists in thinking that there is a gathering of films that can be described with the term documentary, or

what he calls *l'ensemble documentaire*, of which is part a film that “intègre explicitement dans sa structure (d'une façon ou d'une autre) la **consigne** de mettre en oeuvre la lecture documentarisante: lorsqu'il **programme** la lecture documentarisante (271)”. In this approach we find room for both the text and its formal elements and for the way in which viewers 'read' this work.

Renov, discussing the complex relation between fiction and documentary, states that “it might be said that the two domains inhabit one another (Renov, 3).” This holds true on different levels: on the level of the ontology of photographic image, on that of the intention of the author and finally and most importantly, in the mode of reception of the viewer. A documentary is ultimately that which is dominantly read and perceived as a documentary. When discussing our case study in the next chapter this will be kept in mind.

4. Representational strategies for resistance within ENJOY POVERTY.

In this chapter I will be using the documentary EPISODE III - ENJOY POVERTY (2008) by Renzo Martens as a case study. This critically well-received documentary caused a lot of disturbance because it poses such critical questions and does this in a harsh and cynical fashion. It is the third and final part of a trilogy of documentaries in which Martens investigates poverty all the while critically observing his own involvement as a filmmaker as well as other journalists and NGO's. In a similar way to how the indigenous African people hardly see the return of their exported resources, they are also exploited by the excessive usage of imagery of their poverty. Martens tries to find ways for the African people to, paradoxically, profit from their own poverty. As we will see this documentary is very self-aware and self-critical and as such illustrates the documentary makers' desire to expose and alter structures of representation in which dichotomous distinctions are reinforced. The film has been shown in a variety of contexts, at festivals and on television, but interestingly enough it has also been exhibited in two galleries, namely the *Stedelijk Museum* of Amsterdam (2008) and the *Wilkinson Gallery* in London (2009).

In discussing this film attention will be paid to the threefold workings of a documentary as discussed in chapter three. The indexicality of the image, the technology used and the more implicit mechanisms at work will be discussed. Also the explicit information conveyed by the maker will be analyzed as a result of the makers' intentions. These two will be seen in light of Odin's semio-pragmatic approach in which there is place for a fictional reading of (parts of) a documentary text.

Ontology

The technical and aesthetic quality of the film is low and as such does not draw attention to itself, or seems to do so at first. The viewer gets the impression that the pictures shown are merely there to carry the content. The camera used is small enough for Martens to hold it and point it at himself, which he does frequently throughout the documentary, both when talking to people and when walking through refugee camps, villages and jungles. By doing so the film avoids the trap of the gaze. The image quality is low, best illustrated by the large amount of overexposed and underexposed footage. The lens is dirty most of the time, which does make us very aware of the presence of the camera (including previously mentioned ontological implications) and limits the immersive experience of the viewer. The events taking place have an improvised feel to them to which the camera responds.

The combination of the elements mentioned above does put ENJOY POVERTY firmly in the category of what Odin calls *l'ensemble documentaire*. The conventions leave very little room for any other reading than the *lecture documentaristante*. The strong awareness of Martens as *Enonciateur* automatically leads the viewer to consider his intentions and the degree to which what he claims is true.

Intention

In Martens' film we have a clear attempt at resistance against existing paradigms. This documentary challenges practice in development aid, economy, (photo)journalism and documentaries. One gets the impression that the entire process of knowledge gathering and Martens' personal experience whilst doing so is shown. The filmmaker thus clearly presents his knowledge as situated rather than omniscient. In many ways ENJOY POVERTY falls into the category of what Nichols calls a 'performative documentary', a "highly suggestive, clearly fabricated, referential but not necessarily reflexive form of documentary filmmaking" (1994, 93). It also "suspends realist representation... realism finds itself deferred, dispersed, interrupted and postponed" (1994, 96-97). By definition the concept of the performative documentary places a strong emphasis on the maker of a film. His intentions seemingly become explicit when someone asks him what he is doing in Congo. He replies: "I teach them how to deal with life." This paternalistic statement can be seen as either a cynical comment or as a complete unawareness of the asymmetry this causes between the people of Congo and himself as a Westerner. Martens radically pessimistic analyses of the situation of the poor comes across somewhat inhuman, which makes one wonder about the human behind the artist. In his philosophical essay on ENJOY POVERTY

Frank Vande Veire argues that questions about the filmmakers cynicism only lead us away from the responsibility to deal with the dilemma's to which Martens exposes us. Trinh writes:

“The socially oriented filmmaker is thus the almighty voice-giver [...], whose position of authority in the production of meaning continues to go unchallenged, skillfully masked as it is by its righteous mission” (Trinh, 96).

With Martens' film we could say that his 'righteous mission' is so controversial that it indeed *does* expose him as the almighty voice-giver and forces viewers to make up their own mind about Martens' intentions and their own involvement with the dilemma's shown. This then brings us back to documentary as dominantly a mode of reception as argued in chapter two.

Reception

ENJOY POVERTY does not have a dominant narrative structure and does not seem to be concerned with the logic of linear time. It's a collage-like film in which we follow Martens in different attempts to get the Congolese people to accept their fate and even enjoy their present poor situation. If anything it is a kind of 'road-documentary', where Martens travels the Congo mainly on a raft. The film is divided into chapters that carry the names of different parts of the Congo and we frequently see Martens whilst travelling. Refraining from clear narrative structures can be seen as a strategy to avoid one-on-one signification through cause and effect relationships. Barthes talks about “the production of one irreality on the other and the play of nonsense” as something that might help to relieve the basic referent of its occupation (1982, 70). This effect seems to be something Martens aims at to some extent. By constructing implausible situations such as described below he disrupts the viewers' attempt at meaning-giving.

A lot of the scenes that we see are constructed by Martens himself, he is constantly involved in whatever is shown. One clear example of this is when about half way through the film he convinces some local photographers that taking pictures of starving children, war victims and raped women will give them a much bigger profit than their current photo's of parties. He takes them to a hospital where malnourished children are taken care of and shows them how to photograph them. Martens argues that poverty is in fact a resource that belongs to the local people and should be exploited by them.

Another instance of the clear construction of events is when Martens travels to a remote village and takes with him a neon sign which reads “Enjoy *please* Poverty”. In the evening he lights up the sign and gives a speech in which

he challenges the inhabitants of the village to enjoy their present situation, rather than allowing for constant frustration about their poverty. He tries to show them that their voice and lives matter on a universal level when he says: “The experience of your suffering makes me a better person. You are providing me a service, thank you.”

It is here that we can see how ENJOY POVERTY forces us to think beyond the idea of representation, in the direction of embodied knowledge. Nichols argues that with embodied knowledge it is no longer about witnesses, experts, examples and illustrations, but about “personal and exploratory voices” (1994, 2).

Martens’ documentary is layered in an interesting way. In a sense he represents, as in speaks for, the Congolese people. When at a press conference where the IMF presents the amount of development aid that goes to Congo, he poses critical questions, the same goes for when he speaks to one of the NGO’s supervisors. At the same time though he tries to convince the Congolese people and as such speaks against them. In the end it is not truly *their* voice he represents, it is *his* idea of how they should speak for themselves and reclaim their rights. What we mainly see in ENJOY POVERTY is about Martens himself and the message that he brings, almost like a modern-day missionary. In many ways the dichotomous relationship between himself (as a Westerner) and the Congolese (as postcolonial subjects) is only reinforced. This becomes clear at several moments but is most vividly illustrated by the following situation. When the neon-sign is put up and switched on we see a few brief shots of a Congolese man, controlling the on-off switch manually to make sure the neon-sign flashes. It is at this level that one gets the impression that this film is not about setting things in order, but about making an artistic claim. However interesting the claim, the means used suggest that within this documentary we are looking much more at Martens as an artist. Previously mentioned Vande Veire concludes: “Vermomd als melancholisch kunstenaar, verliefd op zijn onmachtig naar verlossing zoekende verlangen, is RM [Renzo Martens] *zichzelf*.”³ If there is anything Martens seeks to represent it is indeed himself.

5. Conclusions and suggestions for further research.

In ENJOY POVERTY we clearly see the workings of a modern day documentary in that it challenges and questions its own involvement with its objects. It uses documentary conventions to disrupt, challenge and deconstruct existing ideas. It

³ Translation: “Disguised as a melancholic artist, in love with his disempowered search for redemption, RM [Renzo Martens] is *himself*.”

is therefore not surprising that this documentary has been accepted as a work of art, deemed worthy of exhibition in museums. In its implicit self-reflexivity it explores the boundaries of what the medium documentary can accomplish. However, when critically engaged from a postcolonial standpoint we see how a lack of attention to a political *Darstellung* results in what almost seems carelessness towards the ideological implication of this portrayal.

This however is an approach that flows from the here presented ideas on representation. When looking at films such as ENJOY POVERTY and other more recent documentaries we might well need an other model of communication that goes beyond representation, a model that does more justice to the maker's frustration with the inability to truly challenge existing structures of representation. This is where future research needs to take place. The question that needs to be answered is what philosophical structures give us the best insights into what the documentary actually *does*. This is not to say that there is no place for the idea of representation. On the level of ideology and towards the political implications the representation of the unheard is our task as Spivak calls it. But maybe the disrupting qualities of a documentary such as ENJOY POVERTY is what is needed to really put things in motion. It is not just the rational, intentional 'speaking for' that is needed, almost in a Habermasian sense. Just as important is the confused, agitated cry and the quiet, tortured whisper of the artist. Indiscriminate and cynical as it might be, it just might get through to its viewers in order to disrupt 'normal' signification.

The observation was made that the documentary as a body of text is ultimately that which is perceived as such. An important question that then needs to be addressed in further research is the viewing practice of the current audience. Can they keep up with what avant-gardist documentary makers such as Renzo Martens are trying to do? It is important not just to take note of the situatedness of the knowledge presented, but also of the location, demography and educational background of the viewers.

The documentary seems to become more and more a tool, not for the representation of the other, but for the communication of situated and embodied knowledge, for personal exploration in which the viewer is challenged to make up his or her own mind. In fact; maybe the documentary has always been just that except that it hid behind the apparent objectivity of its ontological and intentional traditions. Trinh, in a voice-over to her avant-gardist and highly abstract documentary REASSEMBLAGE, says: "I do not intend to speak about. Just speak nearby." Where documentary makers walk these paths, theorists need new models to describe what takes place. They will not fully replace ideas on

representation at least for quite some time. They should aim at a synergetic relationship between the two. It is here that future research will proof most fruitful.

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Case study

“EPISODE III - ENJOY POVERTY” 2008, Renzo Martens