

# In and out of this world: digital video and the aesthetics of realism in the new hybrid documentary

Ohad Landesman *New York University*

## Abstract

*Digital technology, often perceived as complicating evidential claims about documentary representations, has been playing a significant role lately in formulating new aesthetic grounds for the long-lasting hybridity formed between fact and fiction in the genre. It has been doing so by cultivating a style of constructed camcorder realism, utilizing the technology's immediacy and intimacy predicated upon the digital look in its various connotations of authenticity and credibility. This article discusses the ways by which digital cinematography contributes to the challenging interplay between reality and fiction in the new hybrid documentary form. Focusing on several unclassifiable blends of document and story shot on digital video (DV) and other hand-held cameras – Michael Winterbottom's *In This World* (2002), Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002), and Hany Abu-Assad's *Ford Transit* (2002) – it accounts for how technologically oriented aesthetic variations become signifiers of an artificial generic distinction, and raise questions and concerns about the manufacturing of truth in documentaries.*

## Keywords

hybrid documentary  
digital video  
realism  
truth  
indexicality  
technology

Some artists turn from documentary to fiction because they feel it lets them come closer to the truth, their truth. Some, it would appear, turn to documentary because it can make deception more plausible.

(Erik Barnouw 1993: 349)

When occupation becomes daily life, reality becomes like fiction [. . .] I like to say that my work is 100 percent documentary and 100 percent fiction.

(Palestinian film-maker Hany Abu-Assad, on his *Ford Transit* (2002))

Capturing truth in the world of documentary film-making has always been a complicated task. Traditionally praised in non-fiction scholarship for its impersonal and unbiased capacity to mirror the profilmic with no fictional artifice, the documentary film has been going through significant formal changes since its early naïve days of observation and omniscient narration, gradually abandoning its efforts to emphasize an impression of objectivity. From the modernist phase of the self-reflexive essayistic form to its recent performative structure, the documentary has been constantly renewing interest in the rhetorical tropes of subjectivity and fiction, entertaining arguments based on uncertainties and incompleteness rather than prioritizing disembodied knowledge and facts. As Michael Renov clearly

1. There are countless examples for documentary's inclination towards staging reality with fictional inserts, or emphasizing the fact/fiction blur as the centrepiece of the document (e.g. films by Michael Moore, Errol Morris or Andrew Jarecki are only a few very obvious cases).
2. Fiction films that move away from artifice and aspire towards the documentary are not a new phenomenon in any way, but the current renaissance for manufacturing the 'Real' cannot simply be overlooked. Worth mentioning are Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's minimalist social documents *The Son* (2003) or *L'Enfant* (2006), Apichatpong Weerasethakul's hyper-naturalist experiments in storytelling *Blissfully Yours* (2002) and *Tropical Malady* (2004), or even Chris Kentis's real-time scare *Open Water* (2004).
3. The term 'DV realism' was first coined, as far as I am aware, by Lev Manovich (2000), referring to a recent aesthetic emphasis put on the authenticity of actors' performances by independent film-makers such as Mike Figgis or the Dogme 95 group. These film-makers, according to Manovich, provide an alternative to digital special effects by embracing a documentary style with handheld DV cameras.

points out, 'Every documentary representation depends upon its own detour from the real, through the defiles of the audio-visual signifier' (Renov 1993: 7). Admittedly, contemporary documentaries only keep revisiting their primordial assumptions, pressing harder on the thin line between fiction and fact in an ongoing effort to redefine the genre's aesthetic and ethical doctrines.<sup>1</sup>

Surely, the flip side of this interdependency is mirrored in fiction films today. When fast-paced editing in tightly scripted big-budget blockbusters becomes the norm, an alternative nostalgic longing for the real crystallizes the two everlasting aspirations in cinema: the utopia of authenticity against the antidote of falsification. Fiction films wholeheartedly embrace non-fiction aesthetics, and move towards simplifying their film language in order to abandon any illusionistic aspiration and obey a strong documentary impulse.<sup>2</sup> This aesthetic convergence is a central synthesis in film history, when most of the idioms of documentary, as Dai Vaughan well reminds us, have been at some point appropriated by the fiction film, in which context becoming 'an *arbitrary* signifier of realism' (Vaughan 1999: 64, original emphasis).

Digital technology, often perceived as complicating evidential claims about the representation of the world, has been playing a significant role lately in formulating new aesthetic grounds for the hybridity between fact and fiction in cinema. It has been doing so by cultivating a new aesthetic style of 'DV realism',<sup>3</sup> utilizing the technology's immediacy and intimacy predicated upon the digital look in its various connotations of authenticity and credibility. That privilege put on fidelity to the profilmic is conceivably ironic, considering that the dominant scholarly discourse about digitality in film has been focused so far on forming a sensational rhetoric about the visual challenge digital is presenting for indexically based notions of photographic realism. Conceptual and theoretical utopias have been repeatedly proposed regarding digital visual representations, delineating the new age as 'a historic break in the nature of media and representation', exclusively emphasizing a referential 'crisis' which leads to unprecedented capacities for visual manipulability (Rosen 2001: 302). In fact, the ongoing expansion of film into the digital realm since the late 1980s and the upsurge in popularity of digital video cameras within the last ten years have provoked countless scholarly attempts to situate digital technology in opposition to traditional film, and to warn morosely against its forthcoming obliteration of celluloid.

In so far as mechanically reproduced visual images are considered to be indexical, providing some truth-value of their referent, digital technology is characterized as an innovative modification allowing for a radical break with traditional image qualities. William Mitchell, in his seminal account of digital photography, cites 1989 as the dawn of the 'post-photographic era' in which traditional film-based photography has been replaced entirely by computerized images, no longer guarantors of visual truths or even signifiers of stable meaning and value. He declares, 'The referent has come unstuck' (Mitchell 1992: 31). Similarly, new media theorist Lev Manovich responds to the plasticity of the digital image by arguing that when cinema, the art of the index, enters the digital age, it can no longer be distinguished from animation; 'it is no longer an indexical media technology but rather a

subgenre of 'painting' (Manovich 2001: 295). The digital, it seems, has come to function lately less as a technology 'than as a "cultural metaphor" of crisis and transition' (Elsaesser 1998: 202), and it is often discussed within a positivist rhetoric that overemphasizes the importance of defining a digital image on the basis of surpassing its indexical ties.

The documentary, which holds a privileged relationship to reality, has often been the site of heated discussions about epistemological distrust and suspicion in the age of digital manipulation. Much of the existing scholarship on digital documentaries puts a similar emphasis on documentary truth and the risk of it being radically challenged by the new ontological status of digital imagery: it seeks to explain the changes that digitization might bring to the already highly problematic status of image as truth, evidence or document. Dai Vaughan, for example, notes that the increased capacities of digital systems create a situation in which 'for most people, and in most cultural contexts, a kind of fog, a flux, will have intruded between the image and our assumptions about its origins.' (Vaughan 1999:189). Brian Winston, worrying about a fatal impact of digitality on documentaries, writes:

It is not hard to imagine that every documentarist will shortly (that is, in the next fifty years) have to hand, in the form of a desktop personal video-image-manipulating computer, the wherewithal for complete fakery. What can or will be left of the relationship between image and reality?

(Winston 1995: 6)

Similarly, and with a specific focus on the possible implications that new digital technologies might entail on mockumentaries, Roscoe and Hight privilege too the anxiety of visual manipulability in the digital age: '... these new technologies allow the referent itself to be manipulated – in other words, the basic integrity of the camera as a *recording* instrument is fundamentally undermined' (Roscoe and Hight 2001: 39, original emphasis).<sup>4</sup>

There is no doubt that digital technology is gradually changing the ways in which documentaries are shot, edited and exhibited. What becomes crucial, however, and so far little discussed, is to study how the different ways in which the digital format has been aesthetically realized in documentary can challenge critical prophecies and predictions that somehow fail to account for the complicated and inseparable ties it establishes with old traditions in the genre. Respectively, much less attention today is given to theorizing digital film-making practices, which do not necessarily lose their visual ties to the profilmic, lower-profile DV-shot projects that foreground the current differentiation between digital and analogue in a more nuanced and strategic way. Therefore, when DV is introduced to the contemporary blend of fiction and documentary, it brings with it a baggage of aesthetic and cultural connotations, heavily challenging our ability to negotiate between image and reality.

In fact, digital cinematography has long been contributing to the formulation of the challenging interplay in film between representation and artifice. Perhaps the most well-known digital hybrid forerunner is Myrick and Sanchez's *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), a mockumentary that compiles a pseudo-video footage of three film students who set out into the Black Hills Forest to make a documentary on the legendary Blair Witch.

4. Essential to Roscoe and Hight's understanding of mockumentaries is their conviction that 'parody is an anti-normative convention, a built-in rejection of the referential' (Roscoe and Hight 2001: 2).

5. On the unique marketing efforts to present *The Blair Witch Project* as a document of a real incident, see J.P. Telotte's 'The Blair Witch Project Project: Film and the Internet' (2004).
6. For an illuminating analysis of the ways in which camcorder aesthetics construct and deconstruct the authority of the 'documentary look' in André Bonzel's *Man Bites Dog* (1992) in order to encourage an audience to enter into a documentary mode of engagement, see Roscoe (2006).

Foregrounding the amateurish technology utilized for the documenting efforts as an object of study in itself, the film explores how the properties of the DV camcorder can foster a documentary mode of engagement and exploits its aesthetics through carefully calculated marketing strategies.<sup>5</sup> The spectator watching *The Blair Witch Project* is invited to perform an ongoing process of generic indexing that relies heavily on what the aesthetics of the camcorder stand for. The shaky frame, the movement in and out of focus, the inability to keep the subject within the frame borders, and the camera's portability, all give the viewer the impression that he is watching an amateurish video diary which unfolds in an unmediated way.

*The Blair Witch Project* officially belongs to the non-fiction subgenre of the mockumentary. As such, it appears to the viewer as a formal conundrum placed at the meeting point of fiction and documentary, blurring fact and fabrication with a twist of irony and parody. Any mockumentary, for that matter, ridicules its own fictional efforts to document a non-existing subject in order to make fun of the very feasibility of delineating clear boundaries for the documentary category; or, as Alisa Lebow suggests, to sneer at the genre's 'continued, head-on quest to pass itself off as the forthright gaze onto the Real' (Lebow 2006: 235). Mockumentaries seek to challenge the 'sober' discourse in classic documentaries, and in particular wish to make fun of 'the beliefs in science (and scientific experts) and in the essential integrity of the referential image', long associated with an unquestioned evidential status (Roscoe and Hight 2001: 8). These are fictional texts that make concerted efforts to mimic and exhaust documentary codes and conventions, and require us to subsume a mode of engagement in which we disavow momentarily their fictional fakeness.

Interestingly, many mockumentaries self-reflexively manifest their artifice, exposing the production process and cinematic apparatus to deconstruct their effect on the viewer. They seek to question our pre-given markers of realism and the ways in which those are mediated through the rapidly changing 'technologies of truth telling' (Juhasz and Lerner 2006: 165).<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I will show how several recent experimental blends of document and story shot on digital video raise similar questions and concerns about the manufacturing of truth in documentaries. Without surrendering entirely to the mockumentary mode, these films exemplify how technologically oriented aesthetic variations become signifiers of an artificial generic distinction. The spectator watching these recent hybrids is invited to welcome and embrace the aesthetic hybridity as a formal strategy meant not so much to dupe, mislead or mock, but to offer a different documenting tactic.

Films such as Michael Winterbottom's immigrants road trip *In This World* (2002) or Abbas Kiarostami's claustrophobic car journey *Ten* (2002) invite us to question their structure and form, and work hard to obscure the boundaries between fiction and documentary. They make a case for the constructedness and artificiality of this distinction, and for the difficulty in discriminating between the discursive methods or aesthetic conventions in both forms. These hybrids are neither simply fake documentaries, even if they quite similarly embrace a documentary style as a strategy to bestow an impression of authenticity on their controlled fictional content; nor they are a clear case of mockumentaries, having no real expectations that an audience will know how to distinguish between

their fact and fiction tenets.<sup>7</sup> They move across a twilight zone of cinematic categories and rigid definitions as they strive to reflect a multifaceted truth rather than engage in a well-concealed lie. Respectively, these films ask viewers to grant them a status of trustworthiness by expanding any previous understanding of what a documentary might be.

Shot over five months on back roads, at border crossings and in refugee camps, Winterbottom's *In This World* (2002) starts out as a traditional documentary about the plight of Pakistani immigrants who travel by land to London in search of a better life. An authoritative voice-over introduces the social problem of the Pakistani refugee crisis, building directly on our conditioned expectations from the documentary form: 'it is estimated that 7.9 billion dollars were spent on bombing Afghanistan in 2001', a sober male voice announces; 'Spending on refugees is far less generous.'<sup>8</sup> Very abruptly, though, the film changes its tone and structure and transforms into what seems to be a fictionalized document, closely following the journey of two characters, teenage refugees Jamal and Enayat, on their escape from poverty to the promised life in London.

Re-enacting with painstaking details the treacherous and nightmarish trip from Pakistan to London, *In This World* is a film that would have never been made with more conventional cumbersome equipment, and could have probably never achieved its smudgy visual look with a different technology. Literally made on the run with a small crew and one digital video camera, *In This World* cleverly utilizes the technology's immediacy and portability, shooting its protagonists in unstaged street scenes, crowds and marketplaces. The more we become entangled with the personal human drama of the journey, the further the guerrilla camerawork will remind us, by its free-floating movement from characters to real moments of local scenery, that this is not a fictitious story *per se*. Circling freely around the wandering refugees without any hope to conceal its operation, it will function as an object of their own gaze, allowing the characters to look at it directly in a gesture often forbidden in the world of fiction. The *vérité*-like documentary impression that *In This World* tries to bestow brings us to a closer understanding of the social problem it refers to, encouraging us to disavow momentarily that the plight of our two main characters is only part of what is essentially a fictional narrative.

While Winterbottom utilizes the imperfect feel of the DV camcorder to hint at an alternative mode of film-making disguised as an unmediated representation of the 'Real', he still chooses to strategically insert a vast range of fictional formal strategies. Animated geographical maps, suspenseful music, title cards and a politicized voice-over might seem, at first, elements of the well-established docudrama form, but their seamless integration into the document makes an implicit argument for the limitedness and insufficiency of the non-fiction model as a cinematic intermediary to reality. Relying on the viewer's familiarity with the conventions of both fiction and documentary, the hybridity produced signals 'the unavailability of the real unless filtered through a range of artistic choices' (Rodriguez-Ortega 2007: 3).<sup>9</sup> The tension maintained between document and fiction here rhymes with the balance between spontaneous extemporization and scripted exactitude that the properties of the DV camera help to achieve. The digital equipment, less intimidating in size and a more efficient tool in

7. A mockumentary (to be distinguished from 'hoax' or 'fake' documentary), according to Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, does not only operate through parody, critique and deconstruction; in a 'contract' set up between a producer and audience it assumes that the latter participates in the playfulness of the form, and 'requires the audience to watch it as if at a documentary presentation, but in the full knowledge of an actual fictional status' (Roscoe and Hight 2001: 17).
8. After all, the film's subject matter is in itself a generic marker: is there any other cinematic mode of expression we are familiar with today that narrativizes the story of third-world refugee camps?
9. A similar argument in respect to the proximity of the fiction film to reality was made by André Bazin in his famous claim that 'realism in art can only be achieved in one way – through artifice' (Bazin 1971: 26).

10. The contribution of DV to an impromptu acting style with no predetermined inhibitions was accentuated as a case study in formal experiments such as Mike Figgis's *TimeCode* (2000) and Kristian Levring's *The King is Alive* (2000).
11. Unsurprisingly, Kiarostami would later make *Five: Five Long Takes Dedicated to Yasujiro Ozu* (2004), another digital experiment that consists of five long shots of nature. For each shot, Kiarostami points his video camera at the ocean or a reflection of the moon in a pond, and holds it for 10 to 15 minutes.

shooting longer takes than with cumbersome 35mm, allows for a natural and improvisatory performance, which in itself connotes the freedom associated with documentary film-making.<sup>10</sup>

When the film reaches its end, it falls back on its documentary counterpart, inserting a title card that announces the fate of the actual actor Jamal: after returning to Pakistan, he has been truly granted asylum in London in accordance with the culmination of the fictional narrative. In an 'art meets life' anecdote, Winterbottom is making a reference to the life story of a real refugee documented by a camera, wedding a consistent 'authenticated' digital look with an aspiration to represent the *real* plight of refugees.

No less a digital campaigner than Winterbottom, Iranian film-maker Abbas Kiarostami, who has always been a quasi-documentarist thriving on improvisation and unstaged realism, had even gone a step further to declare his exclusive devotion to the new format after shooting *ABC Africa* (2001). Though both directors garnish their unmediated digital film-making with an interest in urgent political matters, the use of non-actors and the merging of fiction with documentary, Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002) stands out as a more purist and idealized attempt to materialize the democratic and aesthetic qualities of the new technology into an innovative cinematic form.

*10 on Ten* (2002), Kiarostami's prescriptive theoretical lecture on the promises of digital video, is an indispensable authorial confession which reiterates quite pedagogically the obvious issues at stake in *Ten*. Admittedly, the latter takes pride in its use of two DV cameras, mounted on the car's dashboard to capture, without any directorial mediation, intimate political dialogues about life in contemporary Tehran. The surveillance and voyeuristic ambience achieved by these two small cameras, along with the unscripted text delivered by the non-actors, make *Ten* another unclassifiable hybrid which leaves us constantly wondering about its factual veracity. The technical means are of essence here, since Kiarostami wishes to reach a technological utopia with digital video. The technology, he is convinced, can display the 'absolute truth' rather than forge one. Shooting with DV is nothing less than a moral decision, taken in order to eliminate any artifice embedded in the cumbersome 35mm film-making process, and allow a film-maker to remain faithful to his natural settings. Although the device is obviously a product of the capitalist system (manufactured by Sony!), he claims it can nonetheless free a film-maker from ideological constraints when censorship becomes less of an issue, and the simplicity and cheapness of shooting with it democratize the film-making experience.

*Ten* is an experiment in minimalism, where aesthetic innovation is achieved through omission rather than excessive abundance of technical possibilities. Without much artistic direction or camera movement, Kiarostami makes use of digital video to bring cinema back to its 'point-zero', and fulfil the Bazinian aesthetic responsibility in its full extremity: observing life without judging it or intervening in its natural flow.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Kiarostami not only reroutes cinema back to its early days of unpretentious and primitive stasis (recalling early documentaries by Auguste and Louis Lumière), but also renews the dialogue between spectator and screen originally proposed by the Italian neo-realists. Cesare Zavattini's

post-war theories of a democratized cinema annihilating the distance between art and life are the source of the moral responsibility to reality that is advocated here; 'the moral, like the artistic, problem lies in being able to observe reality, not to extract fictions from it' (Zavattini 1953: 43). Respectively, Kiarostami avoids the use of an excessive plot or cinematic action in order to prevent the spectator from locking herself into an illusionary reality, an unnecessary artifice. By abolishing completely a world of representations and placing austere and primitive images in opposition to western cinematic practices, he proves to be an even more radical neo-realist than Zavattini.

Kiarostami's enthusiastic vision correlates in its rhetoric with many earlier forecasts to the future of camera technology in film history. Jean Rouch, following up on Dziga Vertov's early analogy between a camera and a human eye, predicted in 1973 that

. . . tomorrow will be the time of completely portable color video, video editing, and instant replay ('instant feedback'). Which is to say, the time of the joint dream of Vertov and Flaherty, of a mechanical cine-eye-ear and of a camera that can so totally participate that it will automatically pass into the hands of those who, until now, have always been in front of the lens.

(Rouch 1973: 46)

Eighteen years later, Francis Ford Coppola's famous prophecy of cinematic democratization supplied at the end of *Hearts of Darkness* (1991) saw the future of film in the form of 'some little girl in Ohio', and imagined a new apparatus that could enable such a girl to get her vision onto the screen.<sup>12</sup> While Kiarostami comes close to surrender again to what Philip Rosen terms as the 'rhetoric of the forecast' (Rosen 2001: 316), to fall back on a dominant discourse of digital utopia, his recent experiments comprise a fascinating effort to resurrect old cinematic traditions with the aid of new technologies. If nothing else, *Ten* is an exemplary case study in how technological modifications can simply help us do what we are already doing, but only easier, faster and better.

To be sure, my wish here is not to propose medium-specific arguments privileging the contribution of digital video to the aesthetics of hybridity, or to fall back on a methodology of technological determinism that presupposes an idealized causality between technology and aesthetics. Obviously, there are countless examples of earlier attempts to utilize unobtrusive lightweight equipment for the construction of documentary-like aesthetics within a fictional framework.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the prescribed purity or utopian novelty often attributed to digital technology should be reconsidered in this context once we place the aesthetic permutations of DV within historical crossroads and continuities. Therefore, it becomes imperative to discuss hybrid documentaries that use other types of portable technologies for achieving a similar effect of obscured generic boundaries.

Such, for example, is the case of *Ford Transit* (2002). Palestinian filmmaker Hany Abu-Assad employs a unique conceptual strategy with his use of a 16mm camera that directly confronts several theoretical issues involved in the hybrid documentary. *Ford Transit* follows Rajai, a Palestinian transit driver who transports locals between Israeli military

12. "To me the great hope is that now these little video recorders are around and people who normally wouldn't make movies are going to be making them. And suddenly, one day, some little girl in Ohio is going to be the new Mozart and make a beautiful film with her father's camcorder and for once, the so-called professionalism about movies will be destroyed, forever, and it will really become an art form" (quote taken from *Hearts of Darkness*).

13. A few scattered cases may include Jean-Luc Godard's landmark debut *Breathless* (1959), shot in real locations with 16mm equipment and non-professional actors; Woody Allen's handheld shaky camerawork in *Husband and Wives* (1992); and many of the mock-documentaries shot on 16mm as an aesthetic strategy, such as Stefan Avalos's *The Last Broadcast* (1998) or André Bonzel's *Man Bites Dog* (1992).

14. About three years ago, Abu-Assad was involved in an international scandal after admitting in an exclusive interview to the Israeli daily newspaper *Ha'aretz* that *Ford Transit* was not a documentary, but a staged performance. The story made waves at every documentary film festival in which Abu-Assad participated, and sparked heated discussions about the limits of what is permissible in the genre.

checkpoints inside the Occupied Territories in his battered Ford minivan. The camera, almost never unhooked from its mount inside the van, documents brief and intense conversations between transient passengers, always keeping tensions at boiling point. The intimate film-making style achieved chronicles the impossible absurdity of the area, a deadlock situation that is occasionally surreal and mostly dangerous and violent.

*Ford Transit*, which won the Best Documentary award at the 2003 Jerusalem Film Festival, has been publicly 'exposed' as a fraud document a few months after its release, a film whose central subject is not a Palestinian driver after all, but an actor placed within staged circumstances of humiliation, violence and despair.<sup>14</sup> Abu-Assad, harshly criticized for playing with generic categorizations to create a dangerous political deception about the military oppression in the area, responded to the accusations not by admitting to have employed a fake-documentary format, but by surprisingly confessing that his distinctive film-making approach involves '100% fiction and 100% documentary' (Ramsey 2003). Since *Ford Transit* has never been officially categorized as a documentary, neither by Abu-Assad himself nor by the festival's committee, it would be reasonable to assume that it was critically perceived as one mainly because it employs familiar documentary-like aesthetics and strategies: a mobile camerawork, an amateurish and intimate visual look and a talking-heads interviewing structure. If so, it is probable that the bone of contention lying at the heart of the categorization issue is the schematically artificial distinction still made today between the forms of documentary and fiction, often applied to films that are too complex for easy classification. Does it really matter what is staged and what is not, when 'the events we're watching may be acted out, but they are not fictitious' (Jones 2005: 33)? After all, everything that happens in the film could have easily happened on any other day in that reality; knowing that, Abu-Assad wishes not to deceive, perhaps, but to contain typical reactions and events without surrendering completely to the formal limitations of either documentary or fiction.

*No Lies* (1974), Mitchell Block's famous student experiment in generic classification, is another case in point here, where spectatorial response is manipulated and essentially varies according to the tag we are willing to put on the film. *No Lies* begins by emulating and embracing the aesthetic conventions of the *vérité* documentary style. We take the point of view of a young man, well hidden behind a handheld 16mm camera, intruding on a woman's private moment while filming a casual conversation with her in a bedroom space. Suddenly, the innocent and friendly chat turns into a harrowing confession, as the woman claims to have been raped the night before. Is the woman telling the truth to her interviewer, we wonder, and are the *vérité* methods used morally acceptable means for unravelling details of this painful story? As the woman's tale culminates, generating further anxiety and confusion about its veracity, we finally discover that the film is not a documentary after all, and that both man and woman are only fictional characters within this fabricated setting. A shaky handheld camera, unmediated proximity to the subject and an intimate confession may indeed connote a documentary mode, but are in no way guarantors of a stable categorization.

It has been argued elsewhere that *No Lies* suggests an implied criticism of *cinéma-vérité* by offering an analogy between the style's obtrusive methods and a physical rape. Vivian Sobchack writes: 'Block has found an ideal metaphor for the physical act of rape in the methods and effects of *cinéma-vérité*, what we now call direct cinema [. . .] Rape becomes interchangeable with the act of cinema' (Sobchack 1988: 335). It is not only the woman who is raped (both literally, according to her story, and metaphorically by the obtrusive methods of investigation), but we as viewers as well; we are betrayed by the film-maker whom we knowingly trust to provide us with images invested with truth-value, since 'the very style of the film immediately authenticates its content' (Sobchack 1988: 339). Surely, we learn that a documentary style is only an artificial construct that can condition us to read a film entirely differently from what it really is. However, we must also remember that the veracity value of *No Lies*'s non-fiction facet as a fake documentary is not to be dismissed entirely. The indexing process we continually perform and the shattering of expectations that follows prove, if nothing else, how the urgent need to make a sharp distinction between documentary and fiction is only a futile academic exercise that undermines and trivializes the film and its effects. After all, the moral critique that *No Lies* may be launching on *cinéma-vérité* filming methods could not have been so powerfully illustrated within a more traditional documentary form. The ending of *No Lies* resonates in our minds long after the film is over partly because it makes an elusive truth-claim regarding the traumatic events it so cleverly fakes. In the same way that real political tension is contained within a form of fakery and deception in *Ford Transit*, an ethical standpoint on documentary's interviewing methods finds its perfect form within this deceitful illusion of authenticity.

The documentary facet in the hybrid film, I argue, becomes less of a clear genre indicator and more of an *aesthetic strategy* by which a film-maker can choose to indicate familiar notions of authenticity or solicit the viewer to embrace a documentary mode of engagement. This invitation is predicated on the assumption that our relationship to various cinematic objects is never textually determined a priori, but always also dependent on our attitude towards them in respect to how familiar we are with different cinematic codes. Sobchack holds that the term 'documentary' 'designates a particular *subjective relation* to an objective cinematic or televisual text, and therefore is less a "thing" than an "experience"' (Sobchack 1999: 241, original emphasis). Fiction films and documentaries, according to Sobchack, are never to be taken as discrete objects or fixed categories; thus, 'a fiction can be experienced as a home movie or documentary, a documentary as a home movie or a fiction ...' (Sobchack 1999: 253). A similar suggestion to regard a documentary as merely an invitation for trust is Noël Carroll's analytical outlook on defining documentaries as 'films of the presumptive assertion', films in which the film-maker intends that *the audience* entertains the propositional content of the films as asserted (Carroll 1997: 186).<sup>15</sup> In other words, we may read in both Carroll and Sobchack a need to shift focus from the properties of the text itself (which may very well be of either fictional or real content) towards the viewer's engagement with it. A stronger version of understanding documentary in this way is an idealist account of non-fiction,

15. Carroll explains that these films are called 'films of the *presumptive* assertion' because such films may in fact lie: 'That is, they are presumed to involve assertion even in cases where the film-maker is intentionally dissimulating at the same time that he is signaling an assertoric intention' (Carroll 1997: 187, original emphasis).

16. On the idealist stance on documentary, see Casebier (1986). The famous amateurish Rodney Tape, shot by the bystander George Holliday, serves as a fascinating illustration of a how a historical event recorded on tape did not provide a stabilized meaning as a 'visible evidence', but actually well depended on 'the psychological and ideological predispositions of the spectators/jurors' reading it (see, on this matter, Renov (1993: 8–9)).
17. Several recent examples of these 'false' signifiers of reality include Garry Shandling's *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992), in which fabricated late-night talk-show parts are shot on video for creating an 'on-air' illusion, while film stock is used for 'off-air' time; and Steven Soderbergh's *Full Frontal* (2002), in which a stylistic strategic distinction is constructed between the film-within-the-film (shot in 35mm) and the 'real-life' behind the scenes footage shot with a DV camera.
18. Famously, Roland Barthes's analysis of photographic codification relies on the same mode of argumentation. In *The Rhetoric of the Image* (1977) Barthes attempts to submit the image 'to a spectral analysis of the messages it may contain' (Barthes 1977: 33). By focusing on the advertising image, he provides an explanation for how

according to which the characteristics of documentary are constructed by the spectator, who forms and shapes the text as a piece of discourse.<sup>16</sup> It is valuable, I argue, to theorize our engagement with hybrid documentaries with a similar appeal to spectatorial reception, as long as we do not deny the existence of a clear distinction between fiction and documentary in more easily classifiable cases. It may simply be confusing, as Carl Plantinga reminds us, 'to deny an objective distinction between fiction and nonfiction films, when such a distinction can clearly be made' (Plantinga 1997: 20, original emphasis).

In the hybrid film, respectively, it is the viewer who ultimately determines the mode of engagement with the object at stake, sizing things up and settling the balance between fiction and reality. The DV format, in that respect, operates as a technological refinement to previously existing lightweight equipment (16mm, Hi-8), entering an already developed camcorder aesthetics tradition. It is used strategically to achieve a strong degree of intimacy, immediacy and weightlessness with *an associated aesthetic of drabness that grants a criterion of credibility to the image*. The overall effect relies on the presumptive state of a receiving subject, ready to interpret an image signifier as a reference to the primary act of alternative filmmaking, the kinetics of amateurish or guerrilla camera operation. As Scott McQuire affirms, 'because of the extent to which audiences have internalized the camera's qualities as the hallmark of credibility, contemporary cinema no longer aims to mime "reality", but "camera reality"' (McQuire 2000: 50). In other words, the digital video camcorder's operation style denotes and imitates a recognizable and well-established aesthetic tradition of realism which we have come to learn and accept over the years based on our familiarity with other portable equipment.

Digital photographic practices are inseparable, of course, from cultural conventions. Most audiences are tuned to invest a certain *real-ness* in DV images because the format represents an antidote aesthetic of roughness, a reaction against the perfection and polish of 35mm; or, as film critic Kent Jones put it, 'as long as DV is measured against the lush, elegant 35mm image, it makes a snug fit with amateur impulses (whether feigned or real) and the casually observed reality of just-plain-folks aesthetics' (Jones 2005: 31). Digital realism in the hybrid documentary is merely another construct, a *simulated special effect* achieved by a conceptual strategy. To put it differently, camcorder aesthetics here connote an effect of realism that taps into, and is governed by, our familiarity with different paradigms of representations. The question of realism naturally remains intertwined with a complex set of discourses, conventions and cultural changes, which safeguard or suspend the trust we are willing to invest in a given form of representation.<sup>17</sup>

The amateurish properties inherently associated nowadays with the DV look rhyme with those attributed to video cameras in the 1980s. In 'Looking Through Video' (1996), John Belton explains that over the years the differences between film and video 'resulted in a kind of codification through which each "look" has come to have a different value' (Belton 1996: 67). Much alike digital video (though quite different in its ontology and image quality), the look of video could be attributed to a 'psychology of the video', which has

come to signify greater realism, immediacy and presence (Belton 1996: 67).<sup>18</sup> But herein lies a certain paradox with both formats. Philip Lopate, discussing the Sony Portapak video camera, argues that 'the videotape image severely distorts reality' in its scale, depth of focus, lighting, camera movement, editing and other ways, but we learn to accept it as true to reality only because of 'highly contrived (if persuasive) conventions' (Lopate 1974: 21). Quite similarly, digital images are ontologically made of the unreal, but more than often associated with a heightened sense of realism, a duality which is by now quite dominant in our current image culture.<sup>19</sup>

While video might have connoted a liveness effect associated with television broadcasting, the DV image, I argue, mostly signifies the unmediated realistic scent of amateurish home movies and the recent trend of reality TV shows. We can relate the constructed DV world so easily to our own simply because we do not only consume it in our daily reality but also create it ourselves. Surely, the associations which reality TV invokes share those related with virtual public spheres for home-movies and amateur photography (e.g. YouTube, Flickr), as both reject the professionalist tenet that has been dominating the genre of documentary for so long.<sup>20</sup> The hybridity between fact and fiction in reality TV is also often achieved through an aesthetic 'illusion', where shaky handheld camera and unmediated spontaneous action create the *impression* of a privileged representation of authenticity inside a fictional and staged environment.

Surely, there are other examples for the contribution of digital video to the formal mixed-breed of documentary and fiction, such as Jia Zhangke's *Unknown Pleasures* (2003), an improvisational study of Chinese alienation; Khoa Do's *The Finished People* (2003), a painful look at Australian homeless people; Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998), a disturbing psychological study of outsidership; or even Walid Raad's *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (2001), a faked video testimony of an Arab hostage in Lebanon. In these and many other cases, the elusiveness produced between document and fiction is mediated by technology and its aesthetic associations, forming a critical strategy that puts documentary's presumption of objectivity to scrutiny. On the one hand, it seeks to engage the spectator in an active process of classification and 'framing',<sup>21</sup> in which the dominant assumptions and codes behind the documentary project are exposed for reevaluation; borrowing Roland Barthes's famous terminology, documentary becomes not just a text, but a 'Writerly Text', whose reader is no longer merely a consumer, but also the text's own producer (Barthes 1974). On the other hand, the viewer is invited to accept the obscurity of the distinction as an essential documenting strategy that points to a possible failure of the traditional documentary project, and reassures the theoretical assumption many recent documentaries seem to hold; namely, that the genre cannot reveal an a priori self-evident truth, and should therefore assert a more relative veracity by exercising strategies of fiction and exploiting the grey area between story and fact. Hybrid documentaries seek to achieve a higher, more slippery sense of truth, reaching at, but never quite touching, the longed-for Real.

an image produces signification.

19. Discussing simultaneous contemporary trends of photographic digital manipulation and factual television, Arild Fetveit suggests that '...we are experiencing a strengthening and a weakening of the credibility of photographic discourses at the same time' (Fetveit 1999: 787).
20. In her seminal study of video home movies, a discussion which could benefit an update in light of the recent proliferation of digital home clips, Patricia Zimmermann (1995) writes: 'Video lost its high-art aura to become more reproducible and controllable in the private sphere; it moved from the obscurity of the art museum to the solitude of the home' (Zimmermann 1995: 156).
21. The idea of 'framing' is well explained by Dirk Eitzen: 'the form of a text can cause viewers to "frame" it in a specific way; poor lighting, a shaky camera and bad sound may suggest *cinéma-vérité*, but it doesn't have to be!' (Eitzen 1995: 91).

## References

- Barnouw, E. (1993), *Documentary: A History of the Nonfiction Film*, 2nd edn., New York : Oxford University Press.
- Barthes, R. (1974), *S/Z: An Essay*, New York: Hill&Wang.
- (1977 [1964]), 'Rhetoric of the Image', in S. Heath (trans.), *Image, Music, Text*, London: Fontana, pp. 32–51.
- Bazin, A. (1971), *What is Cinema? Volume 2*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Belton, J. (1996), 'Looking Through Video: The Psychology of Video and Film', in Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg (eds), *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 61–72.
- Carroll, N. (1997), 'Fiction, Non-fiction, and the Films of Presumptive Assertion: A Conceptual Analysis', in Richard Allen and Murray Smith (eds), *Film Theory and Philosophy*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 173–202.
- Casebier, A. (1986), 'Idealist and Realist Theories of the Documentary', *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, 6: 1 (Fall), pp. 66–75.
- Eitzen, D. (1995), 'When is a Documentary: Documentary as a Mode of Reception', *Cinema Journal*, 35: 1, pp. 81–102.
- Elsaesser, T. (1998), 'Digital Cinema: Delivery, Event, Time', in Thomas Elsaesser and Kay Hoffmann (eds), *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 201–22.
- Fetveit, A. (1999), 'Reality TV in the digital era: a paradox in visual culture?', *Media, Culture & Society*, 21, pp. 787–804.
- Jones, K. (2005), 'I Walk the Line: Hybrid Cinema', *Film Comment* 41: 1 (January/February), pp. 30–33.
- Juhasz, Alexandra and Lerner, Jesse (2006), 'Introduction: Phony Definitions and Troubling Taxonomies of the Fake Documentary', in Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner (eds), *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 1–35.
- Lebow, A. (2006), 'Faking What? Making a Mockery of Documentary', in Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner (eds), *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 223–37.
- Lopate, P. (1974), 'Aesthetics of the Portapak', *Radical Software* 2: 6, pp. 18–21.
- Manovich, L. (2000), 'From DV Realism to a Universal Recording Machine', [http://www.manovich.net/DOCS/reality\\_media\\_final.doc](http://www.manovich.net/DOCS/reality_media_final.doc). Accessed September 2007.
- (2001), *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- McQuire, S. (2000), 'Impact Aesthetics: Back to the Future in Digital Cinema? Millennial Fantasies', *Convergence*, 6: 2, 41-61.
- Mitchell, J.W. (1992), *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Plantinga, C. (1997), *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ramsey, N. (2003), 'Drama Finds a Palestinian Film-maker', *New York Times* (12 June).
- Renov, M. (1993), 'Introduction: The Truth About Non-Fiction', in Michael Renov (ed.), *Theorizing Documentary*, New York: Routledge, pp. 1–11.
- Rodriguez-Ortega, V. (2007), 'Transnational Media Imaginaries: Cinema, Digital Technology, and Uneven Globalization', chapter 4, unpublished dissertation, Department of Cinema Studies: New York University.

- Roscoe, J. (2006), 'Man Bites Dog: Deconstructing the Documentary Look', in Gary D. Rhodes and John Parris Springer (eds), *Docufictions: Essays on the Intersection of Documentary and Fictional Filmmaking*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., pp. 205–15.
- Roscoe, J. and Hight, C. (2001), *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Rosen, P. (2001), 'Old and New: Image, Indexicality, and Historicity in the Digital Utopia', in *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 301–49.
- Rouch, J. (2003), *Ciné-Ethnography*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sobchack, V. (1988), 'No Lies: Direct Cinema as Rape', in Alan Rosenthal (ed.), *New Challenges for Documentary*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 332–41.
- (1999), 'Toward a Phenomenology of Non-fictional Film Experience', in Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (eds), *Collecting Visible Evidence*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 241–54.
- Telotte, J.P. (2004), 'The Blair Witch Project Project: Film and the Internet', in Sarah L. Higley and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (eds), *Nothing That Is: Millennial Cinema and the Blair Witch Controversies*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 37–51.
- Vaughan, D. (1999), *For Documentary: Twelve Essays*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Winston, B. (1995), *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited*, London: BFI Publishing.
- Zavattini, C. (1953), 'Some Ideas on the Cinema' in Philip Simpson, Andrew Utterson, and K.J. Shepherdson (eds) (2004) *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*. Vol. IV. London: Routledge, pp. 40–50.
- Zimmermann, P. (1995), *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

### Suggested citation

- Landesman, O. (2008), 'In and out of this world: digital video and the aesthetics of realism in the new hybrid documentary', *Studies in Documentary Film* 2: 1, pp. 33–45, doi: 10.1386/sdf.2.1.33/1

### Contributor details

Ohad Landesman is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Cinema Studies at New York University, from which he holds a Master's degree too. In addition, he has a bachelor degree in Film and Television and a LLB (Bachelor of Laws) from Tel-Aviv University. He is currently working on a dissertation project exploring digital video aesthetics in contemporary documentaries, and his writings have appeared in *Film Comment*, *Cineaste*, *Reverse Shot*, *IndieWIRE*, and the Israeli daily newspaper *Ma'ariv*. Contact: Ohad Landesman, New York University, Department of Cinema Studies, 721 Broadway, New York, NY.  
E-mail: ohad.landesman@nyu.edu