

CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARY

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Forms, Genres, Innovations

Being to Be Real: The Artistry of Anjali...
Chad Leland

The Mediation...
Chad Leland

Animated Documentary...
Annette Hertz

Producing the Contemporary Documentary: The Implications...
of Storytelling and Technology
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1

LYING TO BE REAL

The Aesthetics of Ambiguity in Docufictions

Ohad Landesman

Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.

(Oscar Wilde)

Introduction

One of the most striking developments in recent documentary cinema is the emergence of films that blur or simply ignore the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, staking out instead what Robert Koehler describes as “the zone of the cinema free of, or perhaps more precisely in between, hardened fact and invented fiction” (2009). In films from different geopolitical contexts, such as *Ten* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2002), *Ford Transit* (Hany Abu-Assad, 2002), *The Roof* (Kamal Aljafari, 2006), *Our Beloved Month of August* (Miguel Gomes, 2008), and *Alamar* (Pedro Gonzales Rubio, 2009), truth and fiction are systematically intermingled, composable from the very beginning. Such a strategy of documentary and fiction hybridity, the result of which I will refer to here as “docufictions,”¹ produces a lingering bafflement about definition. Docufictions allow a viewer to simultaneously adopt different attitudes and embrace distinct modes of engagement toward them, without these necessarily conflicting with one another. By doing so, they tap into a viewer’s familiarity with contemporary paradigms of representation, and take advantage of this knowledge to expand and challenge any prescribed and rigid understanding of what constitutes a film as a documentary. Such a viewing mode of instability, an ongoing state of uncertainty about the possibility of placing a film within definitive and familiar categories, is not merely the result of a playful hoax, but the function of mixed intentions of the filmmakers that invite contradictory expectations from an audience. To paraphrase Noël Carroll, the ambiguity produced between fiction and nonfiction makes difficult a distinction “between the commitments of the texts,” and not just “between the surface structures of the texts” (1996: 287).

While only limited attention to the docufiction has been given in academic texts, such a strategy of commingling fact and fiction has been gaining a lot of buzz lately in critical circles. Dennis Lim speaks of films that “could be said to blur or thwart or simply ignore the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, staking out instead a productive liminal zone in between” (2012). Analyzing recent docufictions such as *Our Beloved Month of August*, which fluctuates between “a musical, a travelogue,” and a “quasi-incestuous family melodrama,” or *Alamar*, where a real-life father and son embark on a fishing trip conceived and organized for the purposes of the film, he points to how “impure forms” are invented in order to match “impure content.” With a similar interest, and focusing on other works such as *La Libertad* (Lisandro Alonso, 2001) and *Sweetgrass* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash, 2009), Koehler recognizes this phenomenon as a contemporary and important moment in film culture. “We have been living through an incredible period of the cinema of in-between-ness,” he observes (2009). Finally, in his book about cinema in the twenty-first century, J. Hoberman makes a reference to docufictions and characterizes works such as *The Libertad* and *Paraguayan Hammock* (Paz Encina, 2006) as “successors to the short-lived Dogme movement in the form of modestly produced motion pictures” (2012: 23). Neither pseudo- nor mock-documentaries, these films are categorized by Hoberman as “situation documentaries,” films that mark their (digital or analogue) media-specific realness “through the use of long takes, minimal editing, behavioral performances, and leisurely contemplation of their subjects or setting. Drama is subsumed in observation. Landscape trumps performance” (2012: 23).

My interest in this chapter is to broaden this discussion academically, and to outline the blurry contours of the docufiction, analyze its strategies, and contextualize it both historically and theoretically. The two case studies I will focus on are the penetrating study of poverty *In Vanda's Room* (Pedro Costa, 2000) and the mnemonic journey to modern-day China *24 City* (Jia Zhangke, 2008), hybrids of fictive and documentary storytelling made with digital technology. How does digitality, I will ask, play into their efforts to creatively mediate truth and craft performance? The spotlight put on new technologies is not meant to suggest any notion of deterministic evolution in documentary, or to reduce the formal tendency discussed to a cinematic trend made possible by technical means only. The role of the digital within the construction of docufiction aesthetics is inseparable from a complex web of other historical, economic, and political factors, among which the evolutionary trajectory of documentary is of major importance. Therefore, in the following sections, I will account for this important context, and further explore the notion of camcorder aesthetics and the effect of medium variations, address the important role a viewer may take in recognizing and defining a filmic text as a documentary, and question the notion of documentary performance.

Historical precedents and the mockumentary paradigm

Surely, there is nothing essentially groundbreaking here. Documentaries have a long history of putting together fiction and reality that the modest scope of this chapter

could not sufficiently address. A few early examples include the recourse to fiction in order to iterate a daily activity in *La Terra Trema* (Luchino Visconti, 1948) and *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922), the performative agit-props of Michael Moore, and the meticulously stylized reenactments by Errol Morris. "Every documentary representation," as Michael Renov clearly points out, "depends upon its own detour from the real, through the defiles of the audio-visual signifier" (1993: 7). Nonetheless, the degree to which fiction and documentary are having their way with each other nowadays is quite striking, inviting further discussion on this formal and thematic mix.

Instead of providing a comprehensive list of historical precedents, I wish to briefly point to how the docufiction has been often bordering and flirting with another format of formal hybridity, the mockumentary. Despite the difficulty in drawing clear lines between the two, an effort to highlight those blurry edges is relevant here. Mockumentaries (or mock-documentaries) are first and foremost fictional texts that mimic and exhaust documentary codes and conventions, requiring the viewer to momentarily disavow their fictional fakeness. Docufictions, on the other hand, invite a viewer to welcome and embrace their aesthetic hybridity as a formal strategy meant not so much to dupe, mislead, or mock, but to offer a different tactic that exists along a fact-fictional continuum. In other words, although mockumentaries emphasize the fabrications of truth, their documentary facet seems to be largely sacrificed to the fictional. Docufictions, on the other hand, displace that skepticism by foregrounding relationships with both fictional and factual discourses, and distill truth even from a constructed narrative.

Two early exemplars for such a blurred distinction between mockumentary and docufiction, made at roughly the same time during the tumultuous 1960s, are *David Holzman's Diary* (Jim McBride, 1968) and *Medium Cool* (Haskell Wexler, 1969). While both exploit the aesthetics of *cinéma vérité*, the privileged cinematic idiom during the time of their making, it is the former that levels a satirical comment on its conventions to fabricate an illusion of authenticity, while the latter embraces the strategy of infusing reality into a fictional story. *David Holzman's Diary's* main character is a young man presenting himself to the viewer as David Holzman, an obsessive filmmaker documenting his life in New York City over the course of a week with a 16mm Eclair camera. Holzman is filming inside his apartment, introducing us to his girlfriend and friends, and intimately sharing with us every aspect of his unfolding life. A fictional character played out by Kit Carson, Holzman is acting on Jean-Luc Godard's famous statement according to which "film is truth 24 times a second" (*Le Petit Soldat*, 1963) and pretending that the only thing giving meaning to his life is the act of recording it with his camera. *David Holzman's Diary* is a satirical fiction posing as a documentary, one that deconstructs the aesthetics of *cinéma vérité* down to its individual components (sync-sound recording, grainy black-and-white shooting, and a handheld camera) in order to expose their artificiality. In *Medium Cool*, however, it is never clear where the partly scripted narrative begins and where the reality that unfolds in the background engulfs it. The relatively superficial plot focuses on a television news cameraman who grows fond of a single mother whose husband has left for uncertain reasons. What makes the film remarkable

is how it places its fictional characters in real situations during a strong political upheaval of counterculture in the United States, infusing reality into a fictional story. Such hybridity becomes all the more dominant during the final sequence, when footage from the real-life events of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago penetrates the fictional story of the cameraman's love affair.

Another early example that similarly thwarts clear boundaries between fiction and nonfiction is *Daughter Rite* (Michelle Citron, 1979), a film that explores the position of women in a nuclear family by looking at the relationship between two women and their mother. *Daughter Rite* is essentially acted, but the characters' roles and dialogues in it are drawn from research and real interviews. It encourages the viewer to question whether the home movie footage represents real images of the narrator's relationship with her mother or not, and if the narrator's voice is indeed the filmmaker's. In fact, *cinéma vérité* segments sometimes relate to the footage or the voice, while other times they do not. As in *Medium Cool*, strategies of hybridity walk a thin line between producing a mockumentary effect of deception for the purpose of deconstruction and embracing a more advanced strategy of documentation.

Within the unwritten history of contemporary docufictions, nothing serves as a better illustration of how the aesthetics of ambiguity are manufactured through new modes of production than the first provocative films of the Danish Dogme 95 group. Armed with a teasing manifesto, advocating both earnestly and jokingly an alternative film practice aiming to counter escapist illusion with gritty realism, Dogme filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg scribbled (in less than 45 minutes) a taxonomy of aesthetic restrictions in hope of eliciting a new creative freedom in film. The document, publicly known as "The Vow of Chastity," is in the tradition of the fierce attacks by French New Wave and Italian neo-realist filmmakers on stagnant mainstream cinema. *The Idiots (Idioterne)* (Lars von Trier, 1998), a compelling expression of those restrictions, is a film that cleverly exploits the look and feel of DV to produce a docufiction that borders on a mockumentary. It focuses on an anarchist group of avant-garde pranksters who are playfully faking mental disability, and tells their story in both a scripted and an improvised manner. While the group's behavior targets the hypocrisy of bourgeois culture and seeks to shamelessly subvert its middle-class values, the style of the film defies not only traditional Hollywood filmmaking, but also the possibility of making any clear distinction between its fiction and documentary tenets. To put it differently, the act of "spassing/spazzing" in the film (the faking of disability) formally weds with the attempt to manufacture a documentary style.

Strategically, the film never really provides a definitive "recipe" or a template of formal cues (traditional credits, for example) for how to read it. It manufactures inconsistent and contradictory suggestions that are partly structured around our familiarity with filmic codes and conventions. Talking head interviews made post facto, shaky and sloppy handheld camerawork, loosely bordered shots that go in and out of focus, jump cuts that disrupt continuity, and degraded video quality that results from the DV-to-film transfer all connote a documentary mode of engagement and highlight photographic presence. Since *The Idiots* deals mainly with role-playing, its



FIGURE 1.1 *The Idiots (Idioterne)* (Lars von Trier, 1998): exploiting the look of DV for manufacturing a documentary style.

central indeterminacy lies within specific moments of performativity that make it particularly difficult to decide if what we are watching is real or not. The film's playful employment of documentary conventions and strategic use of DV aesthetics would become highly influential in the years to come for other filmmakers engaging with the docufiction format.

Both mockumentaries and docufictions help to expand our understanding of what constitutes a documentary, the former by means of parody or pure fakery, and the latter by forming a troubled relationship with the real. Such an understanding of both modes, which are not always easy to separate from each other, enables us to recognize in them a strong documentary dimension, or at least one that stems from a certain aspiration to document, without splitting hairs in making a clear distinction between the two.² In the docufictions I will discuss below, it is fiction that is diffused into reality without the risk of shattering the essence of the text as being partly a documentary, or the experience of it as such. The skepticism it infuses into the documentary structure, I argue, works to expand its epistemological value and not necessarily compromise it.

"Judgment comes easy in documentary": *In Vanda's Room* and the need to play oneself

Ossos (1997), *In Vanda's Room* (2000) and *Colossal Youth* (2006) are three films made by the Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa. Referred to by critics as "The

Fontainhas Trilogy,” they focus on a neighborhood in Lisbon that does not exist anymore, a place that was completely demolished between the years 2000 and 2005. As such, the films chronicle the life of Fontainhas’s inhabitants, a community of native Portuguese and immigrants from Portugal’s former colonies, who were relocated to public housing after bulldozers tore down their homes. *In Vanda’s Room*, the second installment in the trilogy, marks an important turning point in Costa’s method of filmmaking and use of technology. While the previous film, *Ossos*, was a fiction film shot professionally on 35mm, *In Vanda’s Room* involves no set or professional actors, and features low-budget digital filmmaking that takes place in one location only. Costa spent over six months with the people living in Fontainhas, and used a small Panasonic DVX 100 camera to shoot more than 150 hours of footage. *In Vanda’s Room* is therefore not only a remarkable shift from the fiction of *Ossos* toward a unique documenting strategy, but also a change of scale, a transition from “working under ‘professional’ conditions to working in small communities akin to family contexts” (Pantenburg 2010: 56). Costa abandoned traditional, tightly crafted filmmaking because he felt it would not do justice to the community of despair he was trying to represent in Fontainhas. His pursuit of cinematic authenticity clearly resonates with the provocations of the Danish Dogme 95 movement at the turn of the millennium. It also perpetuates the premise of the Italian neo-realists, who were advocating in the 1940s the use of smaller shooting crews in real locations with no artificial lighting.

Costa was shooting in Fontainhas on a daily basis, capturing the everyday while subtracting himself as much as possible from the reality he documented. With his DV camera he remained unobtrusive, helping his subjects slowly forget his presence (or at least become oblivious to it), and accept him “not as a film-maker but as a trustworthy fellow inhabitant” (Pantenburg 2010: 58). However, while *In Vanda’s Room* may look and feel like a straightforward documentary for most viewers, most of the scenes in it are rehearsed and were taken using multiple takes. In fact, it was Vanda who urged Costa to transform her from a predetermined fictional character in *Ossos* (Clotilde) to a destabilized documentary subject in the second film, in order to better reflect her true self. Accordingly, Costa decided that the neighborhood’s residents would *play themselves* and become characters in a movie about their life. The two main characters, sisters Vanda and Zita Duarte, are mostly seen sitting on a bed in a dark and cramped room, smoking heroin and talking endlessly about almost nothing. The stories that they report to us in a confessional mode are assembled from daily events with no made-up additions.

Costa often speaks freely about blurring the boundaries between fiction and documentary. He admits:

When I went with *In Vanda’s Room* to documentary film festivals [...] the thing was: is it documentary or fiction? Where does fiction end? Are they smoking real drugs? [...] The film doesn’t matter, really, since cinema doesn’t matter for these people. Judgment comes easy in documentary.

(Samin and Sturgeon 2011)

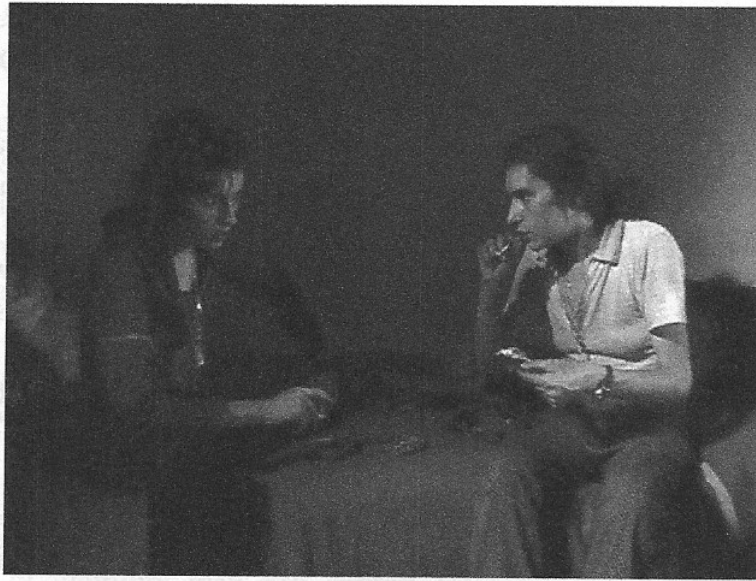


FIGURE 1.2 *In Vanda's Room* (Pedro Costa, 2000): Vanda and Zita Duarte.

Hybridity for Costa is an act of provocation and challenge leveled toward the viewer and the film industry. In a lecture given at the Tokyo Film School in March of 2004, Costa speaks about his films as containing “a closed door that leaves us guessing.” He writes:

the more I close the doors, the more I hinder the spectator from taking pleasure in seeing himself on the screen—because I don't want that—the more I close the doors, the more I'm going to have the spectator against me, perhaps against the film, but at least he will be, I hope, uncomfortable and at war.

(Costa 2007)

In other words, Costa is not interested in encouraging identification or creating empathy with his characters, but wishes to keep a viewer restless and troubled. “For me,” admits Costa, “the primary function of cinema is to make us feel that something isn't right” (2007). A viewer watching *In Vanda's Room* is deprived of the usual pleasure associated with satiating an appetite for continuity: conversations between characters are captured without reverse shots, are framed within claustrophobic spaces, and unfold with no camera movement. The unflinching and direct gaze of the fixed camera does not spare the viewer any discomfort. On one occasion, Costa's DV camera remains fixed on Vanda's face while she is coughing up phlegm for over a minute. This not only creates a sickening and alienating effect on the viewer, but also provides an indisputable evidentiary reminder of Vanda's poverty and drug addiction.

In Vanda's Room takes place in a relatively small space that is divided into two sections: Vanda's room and the surrounding neighborhood. However, there is no clear audial separation between the two, and one can clearly hear sounds through the thin walls separating them: voices from the kitchen, sounds of children

chattering or noises of bulldozers demolishing the neighborhood. These offscreen sounds penetrate what lies within the frame and intermingle with the dialogues of characters sitting in the room. In fact, it is the fixed and rigid framing of shots that further calls attention to those sounds and to what lies beyond the frame, outside the bedroom or the house. Such spatial confinement, observes Jean-Louis Comolli, is “an opening, a call to the non-visible” (2010: 64). In that sense, framing in Costa’s film emphasizes what is left outside, “*the site of what remains*: what remains to be shown, to be acted out, to be experienced. A reserve, a surplus, a beyond” (65; emphasis in original). In other words, by creating a space clearly separated by vision, rather than by sound, Costa reassembles the real from its leftover traces, creating a world that includes what conventional cinema may consider “off-topic” or a digression.

By making the off-screen space present through audio, Costa merges indoor and outdoor spaces. “Every narrow street becomes a hallway,” observes Vered Maimon, “and every enclosed space is simultaneously a house, a business and a social meeting space” (2012: 339). These spaces form two sides of the same reality in which Vanda is trapped, and from which she cannot escape. *In Vanda’s Room* is a film that offers no redemption or catharsis, and everyone in it speaks about an impending death. Since Vanda’s tragic daily existence is inseparable from the neighborhood that shapes it, Costa crafts no clear territory of what may be seen as a home or a place to which to run away. Surely, Vanda does not hope for a better future, and there is nothing that we can do for her as a character: “It’s the life we want,” she assures herself; “that’s how I see it.” The world in which such a fatalistic character lives is painted with no optimistic colors, shaped as a claustrophobic space where suffocating Vanda is entrapped.

Vanda is underprivileged, a drug addict whose life is merely a leftover of an exploiting economic system. Thus, she is a subject often excluded by film, neglected by a medium that has not yet found the appropriate means to represent her. Costa is well aware of that, and turns away from the trap of exploiting her misery cinematically. His choice of using long takes, chiaroscuro lighting (with only candles or light emerging from the windows), and minimal movement of the camera are all stylistic decisions that adhere to anti-naturalism. Poverty and misery may be represented with a distinguished cinematic style here, but they never look attractive. Costa’s decision to patiently observe Vanda without interfering in her conversations is an ethical choice that creates a space of equality in which subjects are never judged but only judge themselves.

Self-introspection is granted to Costa’s subjects by way of allowing them to *play themselves* in a performance rather than simply be themselves (Maimon 2012: 343). Such a subversive strategy of representation entails important political ramifications by opening up for the people in Fontainhas the possibility of imagining a new form of subjectivity. Instead of predetermining their identities in advance, Costa facilitates a dynamic political process of becoming, where the unfixed performed identities of Zita, Vanda, and the other subjects, placed in the liminal zone between fiction and reality, allow for a new way of telling stories of a struggle against inequality.

Soliciting the viewer: documentary redefinition and camcorder aesthetics

The need to tag, categorize, or name the object of our viewing experience is a common spectatorial pleasure in film. However, such an appetite to engage with well-defined artifacts with clear boundaries, traditionally encouraged by both the genre system and the auteur tradition, cannot be easily satisfied by the docufiction. As Costa's case clearly illustrates, the docufiction is a text whose ambiguous structure grants none of this pleasure of certainty. In fact, it provocatively works against it. The invitation to adopt an attitude simultaneously of faith and of skepticism toward the knowledge gained from an image or sound leaves a viewer with what may seem to be a paradox in need of a resolution: does what is shown or heard need to be trusted or suspected? Do we, as viewers, choose to embrace a documentary mode of engagement or prefer to play the game of fiction?

Strategies of hybridity may also contest and challenge Noël Carroll's understanding of the process of indexing in documentary as a "tagging" mechanism taking place *before* the viewer enters the theater: "We don't characteristically go to films about which we must guess whether they are fiction or nonfiction." Writing more than 30 years ago, Carroll argues that "they are generally indexed one way or another" (1983: 24). Carroll believes in a solid ontological definition that differentiates between these two modes based on the intended function of the text. However, many films today are never really tagged in one way or another (e.g. in festival programs, film reviews, etc.) to make possible a clear-cut classification, but simply encourage the vagueness of that distinction to linger on long after the viewer enters the theater.

As I argue elsewhere, the documentary facet in the docufiction becomes lately "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" (Landesman 2008: 41; emphasis in original). This invitation is predicated on the assumption that our relationship to various cinematic objects is never completely determined a priori, but is always also dependent on our engagement with these objects during the experience of watching them. The idea of "framing" a text according to how it uses familiar filmic conventions is 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!" (1995: 91). This strand of thinking about defining a documentary according to the viewer's engagement with it responds to the limits of more traditional attempts to define a documentary solely on the basis of its textual components.

John Grierson's classic definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" (1993: 8) has stood well the test of time, mainly because it accounts for the two opposing poles in each documentary film: the inseparable tie that the recording holds between representation and reality, and the necessary component of creativity that is added by the translation of such reality to the screen. Broad enough to

contain almost any cinematic text, Grierson's definition still poses a serious challenge: how much actuality remains after the creative treatment is over, and what difference does it really make for the viewer? While any documentary film blurs boundaries between what is real and what is staged, an answer to this question matters tremendously because there is still quite an important difference between treating a film as a work of fiction and a documentary. As Michael Renov clarifies, "fiction is oriented toward *a* world, nonfiction toward *the* world" (2004: 22; emphases in original). Even if Renov admits elsewhere that fiction and nonfiction are two domains that "inhabit one another" (1993: 3), such a distinction is worth holding on to if we are to understand a documentary as a filmic text that makes important assertions about the real world. Noël Carroll proposes to differentiate documentaries from fiction films by seeing the former as "films of the presumptive assertion," in which the filmmaker intends that the audience entertains the propositional content of the films as asserted (1997: 186).

Such an understanding of documentary as dependent on the author's intentions encompasses the audience response as a necessary component. It is important not only that the filmmaker *intends* that the text is received in a certain way, but also that the textual cues that signal this intention are *received* in such a way by the audience. An attempt to define the documentary by shifting focus from the properties of the text itself (which may very well be of either fictional or documentary-style content) toward the viewer's engagement with it is crucial, in my opinion, to better understand complex strategies of hybridity in documentary today. Dai Vaughan, one of the strongest proponents of this line of thinking, argues:

The term "documentary" properly describes not a style or method or a genre of filmmaking but a mode of response to film material [...] a crucial fact about the definition of documentary as a mode of response is that it places the attribution of documentary significance squarely within the province of the viewer.

(1999: 58)

Emphasizing further the spectator's role in the process, Vivian Sobchack provocatively 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*" (1999: 241; emphases in original). Since every spectator "is an active agent in constituting what counts as memory, fiction, or document," and carries a certain conscious attitude toward the cinematic object, fiction films and documentaries, according to Sobchack, can never 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" (253). Sobchack's receptive strategy is moving the focus further away from the inherent documentary components found within a film text, and toward an understanding of how texts are *read*.

Obviously, relying too heavily on the spectator as the agent who can make any film a documentary can lead to strong subjectivism, and seems to imply too

slippery a slope for regarding any work of fiction as a documentary. Some kind of a middle ground between a textual definition and a reception-based understanding of documentary may be more productive here. Carl Plantinga traces such a territory by claiming that the “distinction between fiction and nonfiction is not based solely on intrinsic textual properties, but also on the extrinsic context of production, distribution, and reception” (1997: 16). Paul Ward similarly holds that the realization of whether one is watching a documentary or a fiction film is “something that is socially negotiated” (2005: 30). Such an attempt at definition, which I side with, is focused on intentional solicitation of the viewer according to both textual (aesthetic conventions) and extra-textual (reviews, publicity material) cues, along with a reception component based on the viewer’s interpretations.

Further, I want to suggest that digital technology plays an important role in constructing textual cues for the viewer watching docufictions. These cues in turn solicit the viewer and encourage her to embrace, even if momentarily, a documentary mode of engagement. “As digital media make all too apparent,” clarifies Bill Nichols, “fidelity lies in the mind of the beholder as much as it lies in the relationship between a camera and what comes before it” (2010: xiii). Digital cameras, technologically refining older lightweight equipment (16mm, Hi-8, Betacam), enter into an already developed and familiar tradition of camcorder aesthetics. As I have previously argued elsewhere, two of the most notable docufictions made during the first years of the previous decade, the Iranian car journey *Ten* and the Pakistani immigrant road trip *In This World* (Michael Winterbottom, 2002), use digital cameras strategically to achieve a strong degree of intimacy and immediacy that connote a mode of documentary. They form an associated aesthetic of drabness that grants credibility to the image (Landesman 2008: 42). In fact, many of the early practitioners of DV in cinema took advantage of the technical differences that distinguished it from film back then. They invited viewers to think of DV in relation and opposed to celluloid film, and to define it against cumbersome and obsolete 35mm technology.

Nicholas Rombes observes that such an aesthetic of early DV cameras in cinema results in what he calls “DV humanism,” by which traces of “humanness, in the era of digital cinema, are preserved in the imperfections—deliberate and accidental—that reveal themselves in the rough, spontaneous aesthetics of DV cinema” (2009: 27). As *The Idiots* case clearly shows, the signs of presence that DV helps to establish (imperfect framing, superficial multi-focus, shaky camerawork, etc.) are merely pointers alluding to a realist style that may connote a documentary mode of engagement, but *by no means function as guarantors for truth*. In other words, neither DV realism in particular nor documentary realism in general necessarily provides epistemological evidence. The only thing that documentary realism truly validates, as Bill Nichols points out, is “the authenticity of the representation itself” (2010: 185). Nourishing such difficulty in obtaining a clear understanding of what is being represented, whether a fictional character or a real documentary subject, becomes the key strategy of ambiguity that my next case study seeks to maintain. *24 City* shows how these digital aesthetics of indeterminacy, achieved through a more precisely crafted digital frame shot with a

hi-def camera (rather than the earlier DV models used by von Trier and Costa), make a distinction between real and fictional unattributable or indiscernible.

A trip down memory lane: personal testimonies of national memory in *24 City*

Jia Zhangke, one of the leading figures of the Sixth Generation movement in Chinese cinema, has often made use of digital technology to segue between documentary and fiction. Jia's body of work formulates an attempt to counter and subvert the official image that China works hard to communicate to the rest of the world through government-controlled media. By merging narrative strategies within a direct cinema mode in *The World* (2004), a meditation on urban life in Beijing, or staging scenes in a documentary setting in *Useless* (2007), a ruminative essay on clothing in Chinese society, Jia refuses to see China's sweeping economic progress as miraculous, and examines the scars it leaves on individuals from the margins of society. He is interested in documenting the effects of transition in Chinese society, those who are left unrepresented, and his films, as Jiwei Xiao observes, "reveal a 'time lag' between the fast and furious economic transformations and the slower-moving changes in people's behavior and mentality" (Xiao 2011).

In *24 City* (2008) Jia further explores how personal life changes constitute the real transformation in China, and examines how one individual's psyche can be affected by an oppressive state. He charts the history of the Chengfa Group, a large military compound that is facing a process of demolition due to the Chinese reform program. Established at the end of the 1950s as a huge government facility for manufacturing military aircraft engines ("Factory 420"), the factory has been sold to a private company that is now planning to build on its ground a gargantuan and luxurious apartment complex ("24 City"). Jia's film consists of nine long and eloquent talking-head monologues delivered by both retired and present-generation factory employees, which together narrate a personal, but multifaceted, history of modern China from the 1950s until the present. Each oral testimony is singular, never interspersing with the others, and is shot in a few digital long takes carefully composed over a deep-focus background. Without the use of reenactments or voiceover, the flow of each interview is only disrupted with either short fades to black that eliminate overly dramatic moments or cutaways to footage showing the factory as it is being demolished.

While *24 City* consists of nine interviews with factory residents who tell us about their personal memories, four of those are fictionalized accounts played out by professional and well-known actors in China. Those performances encompass a more universalized narrative that leaves a space for local viewers to project their own experiences into the stories. In fact, Jia interviewed around a hundred and thirty workers initially, with the intention of making a more conventional documentary. The decision to turn to a hybrid format only came later and was easily accommodated by digital technology that did not require him to restructure the budget.³ Digital also makes the effect of doc-fiction hybridity smoother, since by capturing

Chengdu in hi-def images that are overly sharp and pristine, everything is interspersed seamlessly: the real interviews feel suspiciously staged, while the fake ones are made to look entirely real and convincing. Jia invests his images with the precision and clarity we would normally associate with cinematic fiction, and complements this with the language of film itself, employing tracking shots and two-shots in a professional manner that goes beyond Costa's modest aesthetics of digital intimacy.

The four actors in the film represent three generations of workers, from the 1950s to the present, and include Lü Liping (playing Dali, a woman who lost her child on her trip to Chengdu), Joan Chen (playing Gu Minhua, a Shanghai girl who is nicknamed after a character in a film), Chen Jianbin (playing Su Weidong, a character growing up during the Cultural Revolution), and Zhao Tao (playing Su Na, a representative of the youngest generation). While Jia's decision to cast professional actors may have been made for the purpose of boosting the film's box-office appeal, and may constitute "an act of compromise, betraying the independent movement for commercial success," it is nonetheless joined by a slow pace, a plethora of long takes, and an insistence on static images that may, in fact, work in the opposite direction and repel mainstream audiences (Lee 2009: 46). Whatever the case may be, using famous Chinese actors is a clever strategy that allows Jia to target a very specific local audience. Such viewers may be in on the joke and may recognize the characters onscreen as universalized surrogates for China's three generations of workers. The most playful fictional interview in the film is made with Xiao Hua (played by Chinese actress Joan Chen), a factory worker who is named after a character that Chen herself played in Zheng Zhang's *Xiao Hua* (1980). She tells us that her first love was for a fighter pilot, and that someone once wrote love letters to himself in her name and showed them to his co-workers. Are these stories real or fabricated? We never really find out, but such a complex chain of representation becomes an even more exclusive joke when the character is shown watching a replay of Zheng's film on television, and the act of separating fiction from reality is made highly dependent on the viewer's subjectivity.

Like many other films made by Jia, *24 City* is situated in the present, where a lingering state of urgency, the demolition of the factory, demands an immediate documentation of social and economic changes. Half-jokingly, Jia justifies his use of digital cameras for documenting China's tempestuous transition to a capitalist economy by claiming that changes become so rapid that they require flexible and relatively lightweight equipment to record them. "With the directness of documentary I can catch up with the changes we are experiencing as they happen," Jia confesses; "but what is funny is that even as I shift to documentary I become more aware of the importance of fiction. A very complex contradiction I'm experiencing right now" (Nochimson 2009: 413). In fact, since *24 City* constantly refers to the past and uses first-person recollections as oral testimonies of national memory, its employment of fiction seems almost necessary. Jia is very much aware of how collective memory is always narrativized and constructed, and therefore cannot be easily represented with conventional documentary strategies that allude to a past, like a voiceover or a flashback. He thus juxtaposes the *cinéma vérité* interviews with

temporal ellipses (repeatedly fading to a black screen for a few seconds), frame stylizations (making symbolic analogies between characters and objects in the mise-en-scène), inserts of poetry (quoting W. B. Yeats and various Chinese poets in the intertitles), and long silences. “Every interviewee gave me the urge to imagine the rest of his story,” admits Jia; “there were words unspoken, and sentences half-finished. I thought I could only fully comprehend these real people’s feelings through imagination” (Lee, qtd. in Deppman 2014: 189). While digital long takes capture facial gestures and psychological nuances, extreme emotions of resentment and anger are still repressed and kept beyond the frame, outside the ethical limits that Jia formulates for *cinéma vérité*.

Such cinematic restraint is used in the story of Hao Dali (played by Lü Liping), a factory worker who sacrificed everything to the factory, including her own son. Dali is first seen carrying an IV drip bottle and walking across a field where military MiG 15 fighter jets are parked. She then steps into a small office and sits across a desk in front of a new employee who calls her “Aunty.” “You should really call me Granny,” corrects Dali, in what feels like a scripted moment meant to mark the decisive generational gap between them. The next scene shows Dali being interviewed inside a shadowy room in a small apartment. She sits before a window with a bleak view and tells a heartbreaking story about losing her three-year-old son on a rest stop during a boat journey from Shanghai to Chengdu during the 1950s. Alienated from us in the frame, she makes excuses for the inconceivable act of deserting a child. “When the siren sounded,” she explains, “it was like an army bugle. We simply had to go.” Jia lingers on this painful moment by resorting again to a long silence, and then cuts to another staged moment as Dali is shown watching an old propaganda film on television. Whether her incredible story is real, dramatized, or entirely fictional we do not know, but it nonetheless exemplifies how nationalist urgency and military obligations could displace family obligations and scar an individual forever.

Dali’s story contrasts significantly with the final confession of Su Na (played by Zhao Tao), a wealthy young woman who represents the voice of the new generation in China. An image of her face emerges out of the ashes of demolition,

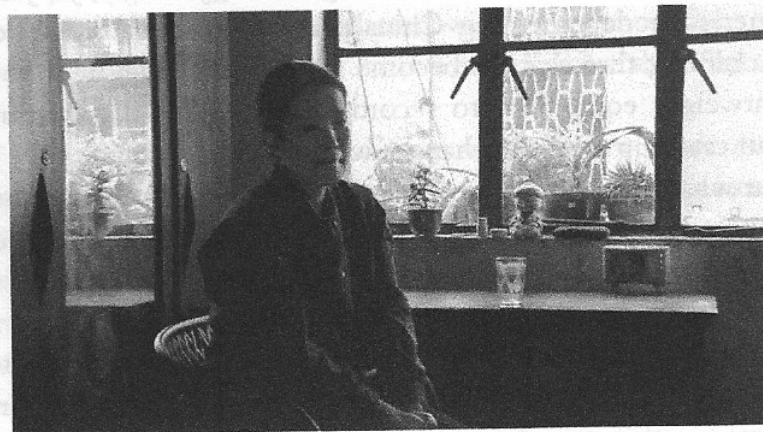


FIGURE 1.3 Hao Dali (Lü Liping) in *24 City* (Jia Zhangke, 2008).

followed by a long sequence in which she is shown driving a white Volkswagen Beetle and chattering with her girlfriends on her cellphone. She talks about how determined she is to make things better for her mother, who was laid off from the factory in 1995, and her father, who is now retired and unhappy. She has decided to make a lot of money and buy her parents an apartment in the new complex 24 City: "I can do it," she exclaims; "I'm the daughter of a worker." The film culminates with an optimistic image that shows Su Na standing on a high balcony, facing the high-rise buildings in the background. The camera slowly pans from right to left and exposes the endless skyline of Chengdu. The future suddenly seems promising.

With this docufictional mode Jia maintains an equivocal and ambivalent stance toward the economic reform and the transformation of urban landscape in modern China. As Deppman succinctly observes, Jia's

evolution from a postsocialist realist to documentarian to docufictionist manifests a restless search for new and better cinematic languages, each of which he has needed at different times to meet the demands of his dual position as anxious inside-outsider and creative, responsible witness to China's changing realities.

(2014: 206)

Instead of lamenting the destruction of the past by national forces, Jia intervenes in the process of personal remembering and reimagines new ways in which film can represent it. *24 City* is not merely a subversive indictment of state propaganda, but a hopeful experiment in storytelling that expresses hope for the future of a nation.

Conclusion

Docufictions, as I have shown in this chapter, both manifest their markers of fabrication and gloss over their signs of artificiality. They openly acknowledge their manipulative and deceptive facets, but at the same time emphasize their ability to hold informative and evidential value. In other words, the strategies of fiction I have been discussing here are not meant to simply deconstruct documentary's modes of address by undermining its sobriety, but work to find alternative rhetorical strategies within the documentary mode for making a stronger and more nuanced argument about reality. The spectator is left not with a vacuum of epistemological value, but with an understanding of how knowledge can disseminate through both fiction and nonfiction tropes.

If documentary, as Linda Williams famously suggests, should indeed be defined "not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths" (1993: 9), then the docufiction may function as the recent manifestation of such an unstable structure, seeking to grasp a more slippery sense of truth. In these kinds of cinematic texts, and with this type of understanding, we can possibly speak about a more complex disposition to

believe in documentary filmmaking, where there is room for both doubt and faith, suspension and trust. Such a spectatorial position becomes inseparable from the ways we understand reality and our experience of it in terms that resonate with ambiguity, complexity, and indeterminacy.

Notes

- 1 Referring to films that strategically avoid easy categorizations or definitions, I borrow the term “docufiction” here from an anthology carrying the same name, edited by Gary Don Rhodes and John Parris Springer (2006). The concept will be understood both formally (marking the inseparability between fiction and documentary films) and epistemologically (blurring truth and deception), and should not be confused with other types of hybridity that may be present in contemporary documentaries as well, such as the hybridity between modes of production or exhibition. The same category of films that I am discussing here has also been referred to, among many other options, as “hybrid documentaries” (Jones 2005; Landesman 2008) and “fictional fictions” (Rodríguez-Mangual 2008).
- 2 I am indebted here to Alisa Lebow, who problematizes the assumption that mockumentaries “respond to the ‘real’ or ‘true’ original documentary” (2006: 224). Since documentary, as Lebow suggests, may not at all be a “discrete and defensible category,” it is not necessarily clear which one precedes the other, and “the legitimation of the category of mockumentary as distinct from documentary” should be accordingly contested (228).
- 3 Such a process echoes Ari Folman’s methodology in *Waltz with Bashir* (2008). Folman interviewed more than a hundred veterans of the first Lebanon war about their experiences, and decided to eventually include only eight of those real interviews in his animated film. In a similar strategy of doc-fiction hybridity, Folman used the voices of actors in two of the interviews but presented their epistemological value as equal to the rest.

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