

Documentary Literature Review (with portraits¹)

Documentary portraiture and high art portraiture sit in a similar dialectic miasma where the main issue since the 20th Century, has been the question of realism. Film's problematic dialectic between the claims of scientific evidence based reality and the subjective expression of the filmmaker, mirrors that of high art portraiture, where the portrait is expected to be offering as close to a mimetic representation of the subject as the artist's ability allows. Looking at the history of film and film theorising, we can see the issues argued in a concertinaed version; a dialectic that plays out over a hundred years, from the first public showing of film by the Lumiere brothers in 1895, instead of five hundred years since modern art portraiture began in the Renaissance.

For both art forms, mimetic representation has been conflated with the reality or truth of the referent and the finished work judged according to how close the work comes to the truth of the portrayed. This conflation and the attending debate has been more marked in documentary film than art portraiture and one of the reasons I will discuss here; that is that the work is presented with mimetic images and sound in the form of evidence, with the use of archival and seemingly accurate capturing of reality 'as it happens' as well as interpretation of the image in the form of an authoritative voice-over, interviews and other sound. It is these 'supplementary components' as Christian Metz calls them, incorporated into the time-based motion of film, that most renders its power in appearing to mirror reality.



Walter Benjamin as early as 1928 writes in *One-Way Street*:
"... the difficulties which photography caused traditional aesthetics were mere child's play as compared to those raised by film... with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, it reveals the secret... Details of structure, cellular tissue, ... all this is in its origins more native to the camera than the atmospheric language or the soulful portrait." (Benjamin, 1997)(p243)

Perhaps what best illustrates the excitement that came with the beginnings of the fledgling film industry is to quote Andre Bazin whose essay *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* is considered a seminal work in early film theory. Bazin's central and continuing theme was

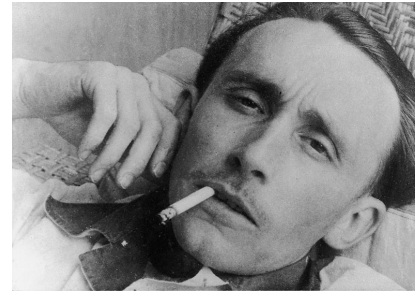
¹ A whimsical idea of mine to add the portraits of the various scholars I review and yet, a point is made. On their own, they mean very little - particularly the more recent portraits which appear mugshot-like in their blandness. None the less, placed beside the text, they immediately take on a deeper meaning. For Barthes, the text forms the 'anchor' to the image, directing the reader to 'see' the portrait in a certain way. (Barthes, 1977)

For Benjamin, the text turns all images into literature and without this, the photograph may remain meaningless.

" This is where the caption comes in, whereby photography turns all life's relationships into literature, and without which all constructivist photography must remain arrested in the approximate... Will not the caption become the most important part of the photograph?"(Benjamin, 1997) (p256)

his belief in film's unique ability, and a corresponding almost religious calling, to capture and re-present reality. He said of the film image,

"No matter how fuzzy, distorted or discoloured, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model ... Viewed in this perspective, the cinema is objectivity in time" (Bazin, 1958)(p8)



And,

"Photography and cinema are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism... No matter how skilful the painter, his work was always in fee to an inescapable subjectivity. The fact that the human hand intervened cast a shadow of doubt over the image.... For the first time (with photography) between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a non-living agent." (Bazin, 1958)(p7)

In this he also talks of the difference between art practise and filmmaking which directly speaks to my particular interest in this dissertation. His belief in the primacy of realism that thereby grants film superiority over painting is something I will return to later in this review, offering an argument that it is art's very subjectivity that relieves it of the burden of objectivity and gives it its strength and poetry.

Benjamin, in his later essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* adds:

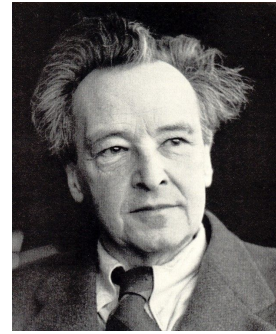
"Compared to painting, it is the infinitely more detailed presentation of the situation that gives the performance portrayed on the screen its greater analysability" (Benjamin, 1936) (p28) and I would add, when the instrument (the camera) is enshrined as the ideal of scientific transparency this detailed presentation of reality can very easily provide a deeper more convincing canvas in which to turn unreality into a *pretence* of reality.

Christian Metz, the pioneering film scholar, offers a similar idea to the one stated above, that the seeming reality is just that - an unreality.



"What is indexical is the mode of production itself, the principle of the taking. And at this point, after all, a film is only a series of photographs. But it is more precisely a series with supplementary components as well, so that the unfolding as such tends to become more important than the link of each image with its referent. This property is very often exploited by the narrative, the initially indexical power of the cinema turning it frequently into a realist guarantee for the unreal." (Metz, 1985) (p82)

Jean Mitry, in his treatise *Esthétique et Psychologie du Cinéma* (1963-65), written not long after Bazin declared his views so strongly, countered with his view that it is not possible to view film images separate from the filmmaker who put them there. It is that filmmaker who is directing the viewer to see that particular image and it is the filmmaker who is able to play with, and arrange them according to his motivations. (Mitry, 1998) This argument has continued, alive and well, in to the 21st Century.



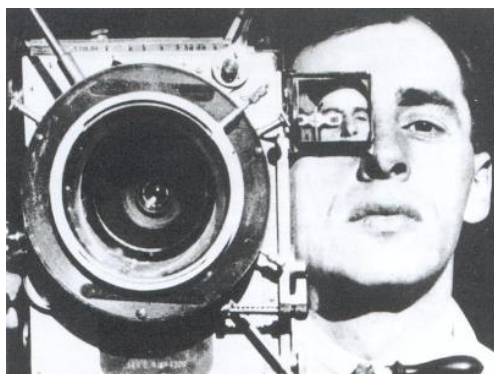
Hence, film has been a fertile ground, like portraiture, to question the legitimacy of this notion. The fragmenting and deconstructing of the 'truth' of direct observational documentary mirrors that of portraiture. The rise of portraiture as the playground of post-modern artists wishing to deconstruct the tradition has run in tandem with the philosophical theorising surrounding documentary filmmaking.



Traditionally, both documentary portraits and high art portraiture have the same imperative; to create a realistic mimetic representation of an individual 'out there'; to offer a satisfying sign or image that best represents the signified and in the case of both, it is not only the surface representation that is required, but, in order for it to have a richer meaning, a sense of the subject's inner identity - Walter Benjamin's 'aura' (Benjamin, 1997) or their 'air' as Barthes so succinctly and poetically describes in his *Camera Lucida*, "*the air is unanalysable (once I can doubt I deviate from the*

Photograph which is by nature totally evidence...) *The air is not a schematic, intellectual datum...nor a simple analogy...as is 'likeness'. No, the air is that exorbitant thing which induces from body to soul...*" (Barthes, 2000) (p109). All this, needs to be captured in the portrait by the artist and both art forms require this third party to, by their active force in this endeavour, bring into existence this image/sign/representation; in the case of art portraiture it is the artist, the portrayer; in the case of documentary portraits it is the filmmaker. So not only does the viewer have to question the accuracy of the camera itself when determining the veracity of the portrait/sign but an even more problematic question comes in to play; in what way does the subjectivity of the artist / filmmaker effect the portrait / sign.

Documentary Authenticity



As early as the 1920s the Soviet filmmakers, led by Dziga Vertov, were promoting the idea that the camera was a scientific instrument capable of truthfully recording indexical reality as it happened. His newsreel series created with Elizabeth Svilova and Mikhael Kaufman was called *Kino-Pravda* or *Camera-Truth*, as testament to their aspirations. Unfortunately aspirations were all they could be. As Eisenstein pointed out

"Absolute realism is by no means the correct form of perception. It is simply the function of a certain form of social structure. Following a state monarchy, a state uniformity of thought is implanted." (Eisenstein, 1949)(p35)

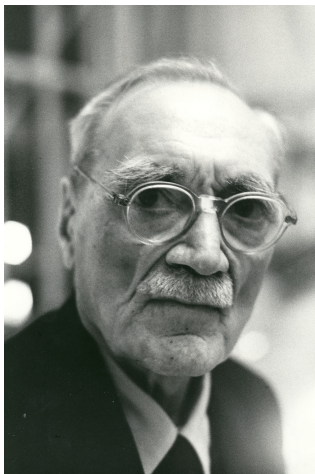
Eisenstein, Vertov and their Soviet counterparts, used montage to shape and construct meaning in their work. Eisenstein explains his theory of montage and the power it gives the filmmaker to direct the viewers understanding of meaning away from the simple perception of two unproblematic shots, into another understanding altogether.

"Two film pieces of any kind placed together, inevitable combine into a new concept, a new quality arising out of that juxtaposition"(Eisenstein, 1943)(p14)

It was an understanding of the film image that filmmakers were able to exploit to great effect, ranging from subtle, perhaps unconscious motivations, to others, and I think of Leni Riefenstahl's documentary portraits of Hitler during the third Reich as an extreme example, with an unashamed desire to subvert.



Grierson



John Grierson, in the 1930s Britain, was of the former kind. He promoted documentary as a film form and, with the institutional support of the British government, was able to secure a strong niche for documentary, as well as an audience to view it. Grierson defined documentary as the *'creative treatment of actuality'*. John Corner wonders, as have most late 20th Century theorists, just how much 'actuality' might we expect to survive the 'creative treatment'? (Corner, 1996) It appears for Grierson, the concept of 'actuality' wasn't questioned.² Grierson considered film could only interpret reality and not be mimesis however he also considered the viewer should be convinced of the illusion of reality in order to make the narrative as powerful as possible. (Grierson, 1966)

And for this purpose, the Cartesian definition of reality as being something 'out there' that could be represented, either by painting, photography or film, 'in here', that is, inside ourselves, was paramount. It was the authoritative voice of the expository style documentary that most enabled these documentary makers to achieve their ends of constructed 'reality' and hence was most championed by the Griersonians. Bill Nichols in his Introduction to Documentary, outlines six modes of documentary with the expository mode being the most commonly seen on broadcast media and most expected by its audience. These documentaries rely heavily on an informing logic and a narrative carried by interviews, a voice-of-god

² Although Brian Winston does talk at length that at the time Grierson undertook his education, a distinction would have been made between 'reality' being abstract and general and 'actuality', being the perception in the phenomenological sense (Winston, 2008))

commentary and as-it-happened footage, and are most able to offer the impression of objectivity and truth. (Nichols, 2010)

Cinema Verite and Direct Cinema

As smaller and less obtrusive camera and sound equipment was developed in the 1960s, both Cinema Verite and Direct Cinema developed as a style. (Name some makers and film portraits) The Direct Cinema filmmakers strove to distance themselves from Grierson's constructed, Expository style.

"One hundred and thirty years after Francois Atago claimed the camera for science, the documentary purists ...implicitly reasserted that claim on behalf of the lightweight Auricon and the Eclair. In such hands, the camera was nothing more than an instrument of scientific inscription producing evidence objective enough to be 'judged' by a spectator. the claim was that of science" (Winston, 2008)(p152)



Their claim, not unreasonably, was that they as filmmakers were now able to come as close to unobtrusive and transparent as possible, thereby enabling the capture of unmediated real life as it happened. The technique of unobtrusive observation that was employed certainly distanced the filmmakers from the earlier Grierson approach to documentary making and moved some way toward a less constructed documentary, however their claim to thereby capture raw truth was flawed. Even prior to editing, the filmmakers chose the subject and chose the shots; what was absent in the shooting and finished film was as powerful as what was present. The editing was an even more powerful source of subjective intervention on the part of the filmmaker because the editing was done with great care often to bring out the single, through-line narrative. As appealing as it appeared, right from the start the claims of direct observational truth ran into trouble. It was clear to anyone with perceptive ability that there must have been a subjective mind behind the camera and yet that fact was not made obvious to the viewer. (the mental hospital doco)

Barthes points out that an historical narrative told without an obvious subjective voice or rhetoric could have an even more covert and hence powerful inauthenticity. This equally applied to documentaries whose content claimed to be historical truth. For the naive viewer, the deception was particularly problematic.

"At the level of discourse, objectivity, or absence of any clues to the narrator, turns out to be a particular form of fiction, the result of what might be called the referential illusion, where the historian (filmmaker) tries to give the impression that the referent is speaking for itself...historical discourse does not follow reality, it only signifies it; it asserts at every moment; this Happened, but the meaning conveyed is only that someone is making that assertion. " (Barthes, 1970) (p154)

In response to this ambiguity of truth the French documentary makers developed a style of documentary making called Cinema Verite, whereby the filmmaker made their mediating presence obvious by placing themselves in the film; the films essentially were 'signed' by the filmmaker in the same way as an art work. In this way, Cinema Verite filmmakers were able

to claim, not unreasonably, that what they were capturing was the objective truth of their own subjectivity. (name films/filmmakers)

This claim had its own problematic issues as Winston points out:

"Direct cinema, for all its caveats, aspired to be 'a fly on the wall'. Cinema Verite as Henry Breitrose noted (1986. p47) wanted to be a 'fly in the soup...visible for all to notice'. Cinema Verite might luxuriate in revealing its processes, allowing for a claim that the work is personal, 'signed' and mediated in an open above-board fashion; but the gesture becomes hollow because the spirit of Arago yet hovers over the enterprise urging us to believe that what we see is evidence, evidence of documentarists making a documentary" (Winston, 2008)(p188)

But Winston says, despite thinking Direct Cinema and Cinema Verite finally solved the problems related to the truth claims of documentary, it, within 2 decades with the coming of deconstructive thinking, was shown to be flawed.

"By the mid-1970s, it was increasingly apparent to some critics... that the new equipment and observational techniques were no more capable of 'actuality' than were the old machines and the business of reconstruction. But without 'actuality' what could the documentary be? Claiming the real was both its essence and its bane." (Winston, 2008)(p221)

Into the 21st Century

Not only did the strength of arguments pointing out the effects of institutional compliance on the resulting truth of documentary become stronger as the century drew to a close, but the very basis of the belief that had held art and philosophical thinking for 500 years, the belief that there was a reality 'out there', a signified, that could be captured identically by a signifier image, was called into question. What was shown to be true was only *seemingly* true, and this was particularly so in documentary.

Minha-ha, filmmaker and film theorist suggests that in a democratic country, the 'regime in power' manifests in a subtle but no less effective way, as the form of documentary making most likely to be funded by funding bodies; most demanded by broadcasters to meet audience demands for advertisers, and most expected by viewers.

"In a completely catalogued world, cinema is often produced, induced and extended according to the regime in power" (Minh-ha, T, 1990)(p76)

She suggests that this is one of the main reasons why the broadcast documentary form has been so resistant to change.

"It puts the social function of film on the market. It takes real people and real problems from the real world and deals with them. It sets a value on intimate observation"(Minh-ha, T, 1990) (Minh-ha's emphasis)(p79)





Film festivals and festival prizes also favour documentaries in this style, where the quality of the film is judged by the subject matter rather than other aesthetic and philosophical considerations. Interestingly, Henry Breitrose pointed this linking of subject matter to the judgement of the quality of film in an article written in 1964 where he said Cinema Verite or Direct Cinema films
"...become trapped into dependence on the nature of the subject. The films, generally, are as good as their subjects are interesting... The problem is really whether the subject fits the form... The truth of an event, then, can be seen using the cinema-verite technique only when the event is such that its meaning is externally evident and self-structured.... Objectivity in film, remains as big a myth as it ever was." (Breitrose, 1964)(p39-40)

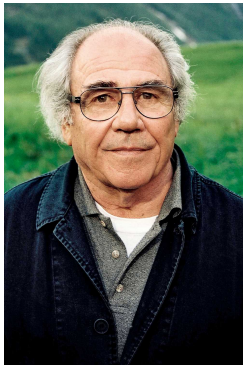
It was (and still is) the films that feature subjects that address the prevailing issue of the day in a way that reduces the issue to an easily consumed 50 minute TV format that most capture the attention, the funding and the prizes.

Even more subtle than the influence of funding sources and commissioning agendas and the lure of film festival prizes, Brian Winston points out, is the effect of 500 years of Western art culture. He sees the apparatus for photography and the style of images captured, as being part of Western culture and Bourgeois political culture by its logical extension. The Renaissance era focused on the development of single point perspective in art which locked a viewer into a single viewing point. Perspective was seen as the sole means of representing reality and the single point the only position to view it. In a way, this was extended 'down the line' into politics, economics and social relations - there was only one position and viewpoint from which one can see 'truth'; there was no room for imagination; the 'truth' was delivered, pre-packaged and ready-made to a passive audience. The same error was taken up by filmmakers. The common themes of life had become the essence of documentary 'truth'; the Hollywood style narrative structure of storyline and background was applied to documentary; shots and editing was done with a single perspective in mind and these elements were seen as being particularly and destructively bourgeois, leaving no room for the viewer to create their own perspective or meaning.³ John Berger offers a different take on Renaissance perspective. While he agrees with Wilson's view on the pervasive power of perspective for conditioning consciousness, he believes the camera shifted that thought. The camera freed the viewer, the artist and the subject from time and space because film at least implied by its framing that all points could be seen at once and simultaneously.

³ Eisenstein in his *Film Sense*, also talks of perspective in painting, music and the corresponding parallels in montage and he rejoices in the richness multiple perspectives (or no perspective at all) can offer the viewer, allowing the film to be left open and unauthoritative. His central tenet is that film must evoke a process in the viewer, not give a final representation. The story, character or feeling must not be presented as a fixed, ready-made, a-priori given but must *"arise, develop, grow into other feelings – to live before the spectator"* (Eisenstein, 1943)(p 80, 24)

“Every drawing or painting that used perspective proposed to the spectator that he was the unique centre of the world. The camera, and more particularly the movie camera – demonstrated that there was no centre” (Berger, 1972)(p18)

This shifting of perspective from centred to de-centred was a central idea in the de-constructive thinking of the late 20th Century where the concepts of reality, truth and objectivity have been chewed and debated to the point where all claims of objectivity in film portraiture, like art portraiture, have to be questioned. The ideas of Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Baudrillard are as important today to viewers and makers of both art and documentary portraits, as they were when they were first posited.



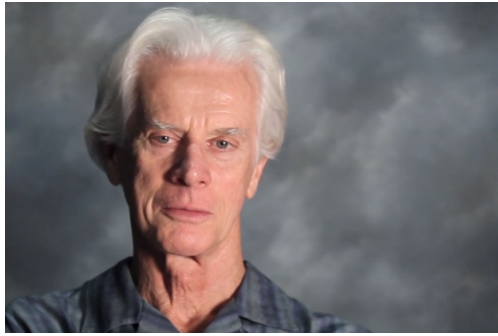
Baudrillard perhaps offers the most extreme of this view, contending that there is no reality to be represented rather that images are only a *"model of a real without origin or reality"* a *"simulcrum"*. *"Representation starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent"* that the sign could exchange for something with meaning. However images or representations themselves are *"murderers of the real"*, never again able to exchange for what is real in a never ending ungrounded circle. (Baudrillard, 1988a)
And,

"Above all it is the reference principle of images which must be doubted, this strategy by means of which they always appear to refer to a real work, to real objects, and to reproduce something which is logically and chronologically anterior to themselves. None of this is true." (Baudrillard, 1988b)(p13)

Michael Renov speaks of Derrida's ideas in his essay, claiming documentary film, when deconstructive thinking is applied, is not that different to fiction. The truth of documentary, and the reality it is claimed to portray when *"subjected to the heat and pressure of the creative imagination"* can no longer be considered as reality. "What is neither 'true' nor 'false' is reality." In other words, both truth and non-truth entail speech which implies a speaking subject and is thus constructed, unlike reality which, although it is cognitively constructed, it entails no spoken assertion. Reality simply 'is'. So as long as documentary is a discursive form, emerging from human consciousness, which indeed it is, it will be fictive. As he says,



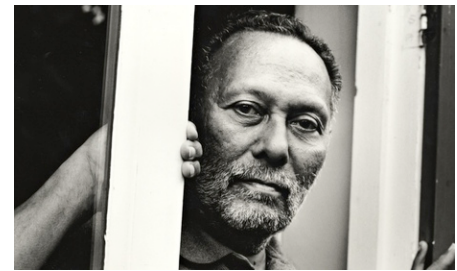
"Truth's passage (with truth understood as propositional and provisional) is thus qualitatively akin to that of fiction"(Renov, 1993) (p7)



Bill Nichols draws our attention however, to the raw footage of Rodney King being beaten by the LA police officers taken in 1991 and broadcast numerous times. Accepting that there was no digital manipulation (and in this day it is not a given), there is no doubt this is *not* a simulation. However, if we were to add the discursive; that is, the additional edited frames and narrative structure of the many documentaries and commentaries that followed his killing, we can no longer claim to be presenting reality. (Nichols, 1993)(p190)

Stuart Hall, the cultural theorist, sums up the power of discursive visual images created by human consciousness, on the viewer

"Visual discourse is particularly vulnerable in this way because the systems of visual recognition on which they depend are so widely available in any culture that they appear to involve no intervention of coding, selection or arrangement. They appear to reproduce the actual trace of reality in the images they transmit" (Hall, 1997)(p222)



Reality, perhaps yes, in the Derridean sense, can be captured in raw footage, but the arguments appear to fall decidedly in favour of the view that created discursive 'truth' can only ever be personal, fluctuating and unreliable.

The differing expectations of artist and filmmaker

The debates in both art forms around the issues of reality/truth and the depiction of such in portraiture come from different places. For art practise, the changing discussions around identity theory, particularly with changes in the late 20th Century have created the most discussion. For documentary, the main thrust for the arguments around its ability or not, to depict truth and reality comes from two places; economic and political influences and the covert nature of the filmmaker's subjectivity.

The strength and longevity of the style of documentary spearheaded by Grierson and the studios funded by government and other business interests, is testament to the effect funding can have on an art form. Grierson's studios had constant and adequate funding and was able to support many filmmakers and productions. Film is an expensive pursuit. Quite aside from the filmmaker themselves needing to survive financially, the production and post production of film is not something that can be done without external financial support. Even with small one or two person shoots, the camera and lighting equipment is the least of the expenses; it is the editing and post production to broadcast standards in particular, that requires high level production facilities.

This has certainly altered the *raison d'etre* for both art forms.

While art, at various stages in its history, has been driven by the economic imperative of patronage, certainly in the 20 Century, with the beginning of independent government

funding bodies, art has been able to wrest itself from being tied to sources that would strongly direct the final work. Unlike the production of film, creating small, independent art work is affordable and hence able to be created without major financial support. The enduring story of the artist in her garret is not mere romance; space and enough for mere survival was often all that was needed for an artist to continue in their practise and to turn out fine works. Larger works are the exception but even here, the major sources of funding are private benefactors with an interest in art in its pure form, or government funding bodies ideally with no agenda beyond the support of high art and artists.⁴

Art is therefore able to take space for aesthetic and philosophical considerations and such musings are considered its major 'reason for being'. The artists aim is self-expression; the portrait painter less so because it is the portrait form that is the most likely to be commissioned and consequently the imperative can exist for a 'good likeness', a 'true' representation, but none the less the good likeness and personal input from the artist themselves is important in equal measure. The 'hand of the artist' is actively sought in a portrait and it is applauded.⁵

When the instrument (the camera) is enshrined as the ideal of transparency the link between the image and reality can very easily shrink to the point of unreality. And yet, documentary is highly invested in appearing to be 'true'. I agree with Winston when he says

"If documentary drops its pretence to a superior representation of actuality, explicit or implicit promises of simplistic, evidentiary 'referential integrity' will no longer be need to be made... Unburdened by objectivity and 'actuality', film of the real world could be creatively treated without a hint of contradiction. The restrictive boundaries of the observational documentary strictly defined, would disappear" (Winston, 2008)(p290)"

Minh-ha calls for a documentary form that is free from the tyranny of meaning and the false reality which is the subject of that meaning. I can only agree.

"Meaning should neither be imposed or denied. Although every film is in itself a form of ordering and closing, each closure can defy its own closure, opening to other closures thereby ...creating a space in which meaning is fascinated by what escapes and exceeds it." (p96)

Filmmakers wishing to offer a sense of truth in their works, will need to look toward the ideal of art practise, that is, where the artist's hand is obvious and applauded; in fact the stronger is the presence of the artist's subjective view, the more lauded the art work. It is Art's very subjectivity that relieves it of the burden of objectivity and gives it its strength and poetry. Documentary then, like art practise, becomes fiction; a fiction whose truth is purely personal; creating portraits that are 'signed' unashamedly by the filmmaker/artist; at once, portraits equally of the portrayed, the portrayer and the viewer.

⁴ This contention that art can happen in a 'pure form' is stated with full knowledge that the proverbial can of worms is bursting with debatable issues that can't and won't be touched on here (another dissertation perhaps?) I state it as fact only in the relative sense, to be seen beside the more obvious economic interference in the film *industry*.

⁵ Indeed the more famous the 'hand' the more it is applauded financially

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Methodology

My methodology is to start from the other side...to come from the long historical context of art making rather than the short history of film making and slowly inch my way toward an outcome that allows for the openness to discover spaces where meaning and truth can play around the edges of what escapes.

Etc...etc...

TALK ABOUT 3rd Space (Barthes), 4th dimension (Eisenstein), Renov, Minh-ha, etc etc.... non directed, non mimetic... Poetic, Reflective and Performative modes of documentary (Nichols)