

TRACING THE TRUTH WITHIN THE BLURRING BORDERS OF FICTION AND DOCUMENTARY

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ABSTRACT

Reality seems to be lost its reliability and authenticity within the simulation era where the distinction between the real and unreal is blurred and we have difficulty to find the truth while being surrounded by the mess of hyper-reality. The ‘thing’ that we consider as cinema today, is a tangible allegory of life ranging from politics to wars and religions to economy which are all captured by a cinematographic form. It’s increasingly being difficult to perceive for the spectator to make distinction between virtual world and the real one. This paper aims to draw the attentions to this dilemma of modern subject and analyze the films 9/11 (documentary) and Swordfish(fiction) from this point of view.

Keywords: *reality, truth ,fiction, hyper-reality, documentary*

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Realism is a contentious arena of debate across broad field of scholarship embracing philosophy, aesthetics and the social science in an on-going dialogue about the role of all forms of representation especially in film studies. The relation of cinema with reality- both as an agent recording reality, and as an illusion through out its formalist manner using the same technology - existed paradoxically within the film theories developed (parallel to invention of cinema. This paradoxical entity, started with the works of Lumière – representative of realist/documentary films- and Méliés who used filmic apparatus to create illusion inflamed the debates between formalist and realists which will reach up to recent times' adherents and opponents of the manifest "Dogma 95" adopted from Lars Von Trier.

Documentary and fictional films have been persistently conceived of two distinct and separate traditions; the cinema of reality (recording of reality) and the cinema of fiction (constitution of reality). The narration style of these both genres has evolved within the period of time. Recent technological development in film making which is used to represent reality as more real than it is (hyper-real), widespread production of virtual images, and the theories that advocate the replacement of objective reality with interpretations or subjective reality require to focus on these genres, especially documentary of which its main claim is to be 'realistic'.

The purposes of making documentary or definitions made for it, varies widely among documentarists and scholars from 1920s to recent times. Here , we'll focus on the most significant claim of documentary - authenticity/truth- trying to range the paradigms of documentary changing parallel to conditions of times and movements. In this respect a useful starting point seems questioning the Grierson,'s famous phrase "creative treatment of actuality" (Hardy, 1966: 13) which is accepted as a first definition of documentary, referred by most scholars and documentarists. Although his definition ironically suits to explain modern documentary in digital age, it was meant rather specifically the use of creativity for social education with propaganda tendencies. For Grierson and adherents, director's interference to create aesthetic impact would destroy the authenticity of the documentary. (if it is used for the other purposes) In his 1942 essay "The Documentary Idea", John Grierson had already formulated this anti-aesthetic ideal of stylistic (self-) denial: "Documentary was from the beginning – when we first separated our public purpose theories from those of Flaherty – an 'anti-aesthetic' movement. We have all, I suppose, sacrificed some personal capacity in 'art' and the pleasant vanity that goes with it". Grierson wrote about the dangers of excessive aestheticism as the "bright-eyed enemy", which could at any moment outwit even the most principled documentary filmmaker. (Hardy, 1966: 112)

The reason why Grierson saw aesthetics of film and art so dangerous was his concern about that overshadow the mission of documentary - revealing the social truth, enlighten individual citizens and render them capable of rational decision-making- by personnel interference significant name Bill Nichols depending on Anglo-American tradition in which style and form have been seen as the opposites of content, defined documentary film " as a discourse of sobriety accurately expresses a hidden assumption at the core of the documentary genre, namely that documentary film is more about content, subject matter and information than form, style or pleasure". (Nichols, 1991: 3)

These words that have been uttered within this tradition sound quite rational in accordance with the mission attributed to documentary. But the documentary done for whatsoever purpose - to record, reveal, preserve, persuade or promote- its content and form has been considered as an entire structure within the period of time as Paul Rotha stated: "frequently I hear it said that documentary aims at a true statement of theme and incident. This is a mistaken belief. No documentary can be completely truthful, for there can be no such thing as truth while the changing developments in society continue to contradict each-other. (Rotha, 1975:245) As technology advanced by the 1960s most documentarists acknowledged the Grierson's idea "... that actuality footage must be subjected to a creative process to reveal its truth. This apparent manipulation of material is both a recording of reality and a statement about reality". (Nelmes, 1999:213)

As a matter of fact, on the contrary of puritans realistic documentary advocates, most scholars and documentarists proved that documentary is not an only recording of actuality- raw footage of real events as they happen, real people as they speak, real life as it occurs, spontaneous and unmediated but it is a sum of documents and filmic apparatus that has to be ordered, reshaped and placed in sequential form- even from the early years. For instance Jill Godmilow , asserted that ;

"Even in the first scrap of motion picture film ever shot - Lumière's Workers Leaving the Factory, a forty-five-second "documentary" shot of about 100 workers leaving his family plant in 1895 - you can see clearly that Lumière had his workers collect just inside the factory gates and wait there until he got his camera rolling. It's also pretty clear that he had instructed the workers not to acknowledge the camera, to just keep walking past it as if it wasn't there. But when we see that "historical" shot today (and I'm sure when people looked at the shot in 1895), we read "actuality". (Godmilow, 1997)

David Cook' assertion about the Flaherty's work which has been approved as a significant example of realist documentary supports the Godmilow's argument;

"Robert Flaherty pioneered the cinema of replayed reality with his 1922 film Nanook of the North. He went astray from the straight and narrow path of the genre before it even existed. Flaherty had absorbed the mise-en-scene and montage techniques of fictional films of the era, and was not primarily concerned with recording, observing or explaining. On the contrary, he used mise-en-scène (or mise-en-cadre) techniques, montage, controlled compositions, third-person narratives, parallel editing etc. to set up scenes based on the experiences of historical characters. (Cook, 1997:222)

Today most of the documentarist in spite of fierce critics uses the fetching tools of new technologies and fiction films in order to strengthen the authenticity of their work. On the other hand, reality has always been a significant place within the history of film studies – cinéma verite, new realism etc. -Using the reality as a narration style most of the fictional films ensure its fictional reliability and truth with such expression as "This film based on a true story". So, both genres use each others' strategy to present their world as real as possible. This hybridization may be taken for granted the richness of genres formally, but it also be read as that

we are living in the simulation era where the reality is disappeared and replaced by its simulacra. According to the famous French philosopher Baudrillard, who used these concepts;

“Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origins or reality; hyperreal... hyperreality¹ thus points to a blurring of distinctions between the real and the unreal in which the prefix ‘hyper’ signifies more real than real whereby the real is produced according to a model...within the advent of hyperreality, therefore simulations come to constitute reality itself. “ (Baudrillard, 1994:1)

Some of the writers and thinkers support this argument giving the examples via *reality shows* and popular cinema as media which contribute to the descent into a postmodern world where it’s impossible to tell what is real and what is simulation. Those programmes which are “characterised by camcorder, surveillance or observational actuality footage, first person participant or eye-witness testimony; reconstructions which rely upon narrative fiction styles; studio or to camera links and commentary from authoritative presenters; and expert statements from police, emergency or safety service’ (Dovey, 2000: 80), would be the best examples for Baudrillard’s theory of simulation according to Dovey. These shows corroborate the Baudrillard’s claim made for twenty years ago; reality of simulations (reality show’s participants, artificial living spaces etc.) becomes the criterion of the reality itself. Berger used the film *The Terminator* as a sample from the popular cinema:

“A cyborg is robot which has a veneer of flesh and thus looks and acts like human being. Some of the fundamental notions found in postmodern thought involve dissolving the boundaries between high art and popular culture, between the past and the present and, by implication, between machines and humans. Connected to these ideas is the notion that we live in a world of simulations, a world in which signs are more real than reality- a condition sometimes describe as a hyper-reality.” (Berger, 1998:157)

Today, disappearance of reality or more radically its infinite production in the virtual worlds which blurs the distinctions between genres misleads us when tracing the truth. The ‘thing’ that we consider as cinema today, is a tangible allegory of life ranging from politics to wars and religions to economy which are all captured by a cinematographic form. It’s increasingly being difficult to perceive for the spectator to distinct these two worlds’ especially when the fictional forms of reality predict the reality itself before it occurs. *The China Syndrome (1979)* would be a significant example since it is ;

¹ Hyper-reality refers to the current condition of postmodernity where simulacra are no longer associated with any real referent and where signs, images and models circulate, detached from any real material objects or romantic ideals.(Hopper, Trevor,2005:325)...Hyper-reality a term associated with the effects of mass production and reproduction and suggesting that an object event, experience so reproduced, replaces or is preferred to its original; that the copy is more real than real.(Berger,2005:14)

“anticipated the events of Harrisburg and the accident at the Three Mile Island Nuclear Power Plant on 28 March 1979, as to deter reality by its prior dramatization, homoeopathically distilling the spectre of nuclear catastrophe in “molecular doses” throughout everyday life. Playing out scenario before it occurs empties the real event of its significance and originality, the implosion of media simulacrum and reality producing a marvellous in-differentiation in which all of the energy of the real is effectively swallowed.” (Merrin, 2005:67)

The films, 9/11 (documentary) and *Swordfish* (fiction) will be used as a corroborating example of Baudrillard’s claim that “in earlier times an event was something that happened, now it is something designed to happen. It occurs therefore, a virtual artefact, as a reflection of pre-existing media-defined forms” (Baudrillard, 1994: 61) constitute the frame of this work.

Swordfish

I saw a dream on reality last night.....It was such a relief when I woke up

Stanislaw Lec

Director: Dominic Sena/ perf. John Travolta, Hugh Jackman, Halle Berry, Warner Brothers 2000/Running Time 95 min.

Stanley who is released on parole and forbidden to touch computers forever is an ingenious hacker. While he is trying to set a decent life, he is enticed by the Ginger’s profitable offer. The only thing he is expected to do is a short meeting with Ginger’s chief Gabriel. Up to the end of film, it’s difficult to decide if Gabriel is a good or bad character or if he is lover of Ginger or enemy. But it is certain that he and the job he offers is quite mysterious. Stanley finds himself in a turbulence of the events.

Swordfish is an ordinary American film which bases its story on a paranoid world where there are extreme lives that the things are not like as they’re seen. And it satisfies the expectations of audience from an American film with the scenes filled by explosions, chases, mysteries and star actors. *Swordfish* was showned before September of 11 Attack and had poor box office. But the thing that makes this film significant is that the explosions on the film resemble the September 11 attacks to Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. The film predicted the reality before it happens. With the eerie sense of prescience and imitation of the real more than it is (hyper-real), *Swordfish* become a metaphor of the universe where the borders of reality and fiction is blurred after the September 11 attacks and it came up at the top of disturbing films. “Specifically, here was a card placed on the shelves with the movies until the end of 2001 that stated ‘In the light of the events of September 11, please note this product contains scenes that may be considered disturbing to some viewers’”. (Wagge, 2001) But the reason lying under this notice was not fear for disturbing some audience but for the contingency of the claim that the September 11 attack was fiction/organized. Because after showing of the film “*Swordfish*”, most of the American people watched the 11 September attract as a fiction.

As we previously stressed, within the world of simulation, the contrasts and identities are disappeared, truth and untruth are indistinguishable and death becomes an ordinary event, which is served for our

watching. That's why September 11 attack became an image which is consumed simultaneously by tv. audiences. "This is the transforming of reality at the moment/soon and make it imaginary/fantastic. In this context, there is a virtual world that is so close to the real one and almost adhering to but never overlaps it and starts where the real one ends." (Baudrillard, 2005:32) From this point of view, these two following dialogs which confuses our understanding of reality, shows that how modern subject is confronted with a dilemma;

" To whom we are fighting against? Against to everyone who threaten the freedom of the U.S." (Swordfish, Travolta, 2000)

" We are fighting against to ones who threaten the freedom of U.S. We are in Afghanistan and Iraq not for fighting but bringing the freedom for them."(Guardian, Bush, 2000)

Fahrenheit 9/11 ;

Director: Michael Moore, 2004

Kenneth Chisholm's plot summary of the film reflects the common contention about the film as;

"In this film, muckraker Michael Moore turns his eye on George W. Bush and his War on Terrorism agenda. He illustrates his argument about how this failed businessman with deep connections to the royal house of Saud of Saudi Arabia and the Bin Ladins got elected on fraudulent circumstances and proceeded to blunder through his duties while ignoring warnings of the looming betrayal by his foreign partners. When that treachery hits with the 9/11 attacks, Moore explains how Bush failed to take immediate action to defend his nation, only to later cynically manipulate it to serve his wealthy backers' corrupt ambitions. Through facts, footage and interviews, Moore illustrates his contention of how Bush and his cronies have gotten America into worse trouble than ever before and why Americans should not stand for it". (Chisholm, 2004)

Michael Moore, in his documentary *9/11* stressed the intervention of reality in order to explore the truth and using this method- traditional documentary never approved- his film both awarded Palme d'or at the 57th Cannes Film Festival, and caused substantial controversy and criticism especially just before the U.S presidential election. For instance, British American journalist and literacy critic Christopher Hitchens contented that *Fahrenheit 9/11* contains distortion and untruths. (Hitchens, 2004) Another conspicuous critic came from research director of Independence Institute. David Kopel, "If all you know is what the mainstream media tell you, then you are living a world of illusions. But you can't free your mind you merely replace on set of manipulative illusions with another set of manipulative illusions. *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a twisted, dishonest, paranoid and hateful fantasy". (Kopel, 2004)

The common point we have to stress here that the 'content' of film takes place in the center of all arguments. This point of view overshadowed the festival was so evident that , director Quentin Tarantino

addressing to Moore, had to feel to make this explanation ; "We want you to know that it was not the politics of your film that won you this award. We are not here to give a political award. Some of us have no politics. We awarded the art of cinema that is what won you this award and we wanted you to know that as a fellow filmmaker". (BBC, 2004)

Is *9/11* a documentary or fictional film? Does it tell the truth or twist it? To what extent Moore added his interpretation to the reality? These questions may be extended but they were all discussed in many conferences and articles by some scholars, film makers and critics. From a different point of view, we aim to drive the attentions to the fact that the reference of reality which Moore use to reveal the "truth", is nothing but fiction. The success of *9/11* is not only because it's well scripted political discourse or cinematographic value but more significantly it showed the difficulty of finding the truth since we lost our ability to distinguish the real from unreal. The critics about *9/11* for being political or highly been manipulated doesn't change this truth. Because using documentary for political purposes is not a new claim. History of documentary film gives us many examples which have been produced during Soviet Revolution and 2nd world war in Germany. But then the ideology was ideology and war was war which means that they were real. Now, we are living in the world that all the concepts –terror, war, ideology, etc.- are swiftly consumed and replaced by their simulacra. Being predicted by fictions, reality lost its reliability and truth. There is no doubt that there is a world of fear which is produced by the perfect meaningless within the plenty of meaning. And this is the fact that "life transformed into a fictional scenario" Michael Moore's own words explain this situation as: "We like non-fiction and we live in fictitious time. We live in a time where we have fictitious election result that elects a fictitious president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons". (Moore, 2003)

Conclusion

The simulacrum is never what hide the truth. It is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true.(Ecclesiastes,ed.Baudrillard, 1994:1)

This paradoxical anomaly becomes the main question of contemporary subject. According to Lacan ; "The subject is the discourse of the other. We are able to define ourselves based on the system we live in. We see differences in the things around us and form our own perceptions of reality based on these perceptions. We become aware of the world in terms of symbolized and symbol or as Lacan described imaginary and symbolic. Those that do not fall into these categories are known as the real. Subjectivity can only be attained once the subject has navigated through the symbolic and imaginary".(Zizek ,1996:70)

The trauma here is the distortion of the symbolic world that destroys the process of being subject. What it is meant by distortion is the infinite production and manipulation of reality which unable subject to make this symbolization. But the subject is always inclined to find the truth since it is a basic reference of the

relationship between himself and the other. It is the only way for the subject to unit his split personality. In most of his article, Zizek stresses that we are running behind the truth so fast that sometimes we overtake it. Because of the value of the truth for subject the latest theoretical works focused on how text is read rather than the text itself. Our reading of texts to determine the truth is a process that is similar to the way that we organize the world through perception. According to Randof Jordan who believes that determining the “truth” in viewing filmic texts depends on audiences’ meaning-making processes of organizing and judging perceptions of what it portrayed, as opposed to the actuality of the images;

“Truth might best be found through the concept of bridging the gaps between that with which we are presented in order to construct meaning from it. Be they the gaps between the digitization of film material and the original film, the digital manipulation of images and indexical images, contradictions in documentary modes of representation, or the tensions between documentary and fictional space, our minds search for truth by reconciling these tensions through a process of meaning construction. At the heart of such reconciliation is the concept of the middle ground, that stable centrifuge around which all perception is built, the space that lies between the disjointed elements of filmic representation that we must piece together to find truth”.(Jordan , 2003)

The ‘battle of truth’ is not between the Documentary and the fiction film. They both aim to be convicting for audiences infracting their narration styles and organization structures. But in the end the power is to the spectator – our interpretations becomes more determining rather than the text itself. As Bakker stated, “This is a consequence of the postmodern dogma that there are no facts but only interpretations. Truth and reality are reduced to products of negotiations – truth has become conventional, institutionalized; an accepted belief”. (Bakker, 2002)

If the truth is accepted belief, we may ignore or even legitimate the filmmaker’s intention to interfere the reality in order to expose the “truth”. Because Films (documentary or fiction) which illustrate this process of the construction of our understanding of reality are concerned with truth. So, even the truth belongs to each of us differs from one to another, there is a truth that based on universal ethics and consensus accepted by the society, correspond to reality. The intentions of the filmmaker depending upon negotiation with us , seem to be the most essential elements that can bring us to accept or refuse the truth claims of a film. In other words as Williams states; “May be it is possible to retain an overall concept of documentary as aiming to portray truth if we view it as a ‘set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truth.” (Williams, 1993: 14) The assertion of Williams is sure valid for the fictions as well.

There is still a hope to trace the truth being aware of the difference between the world we construct and the distorted reflection of the other, avoiding the artful traps which thrust the reality under our eyes using the seductive techniques.

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