

**TRANSCENDENTAL REALISM IN  
DOCUMENTARY**

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## **Prologue: An Introduction**

What defines the documentary genre is also at the root of its limitations; an epistemology which ties it to the factual or empirical experience of life. The very term, documentary, itself has a strong association to the industrial age from which the moving image medium emerged: empirical proof, factual evidence, scientific methodology and psychological justification all serve to reinforce the role which the documentary genre is expected to play. The emergence of anthropology and sociology as pseudo scientific disciplines has helped cement the notion of factual representation of reality.

Here, I shall call for a different perspective on the documentary form; not with a view to discussing what documentary is, but to make some suggestions of what it could be. I hope to speak as a filmmaker and not an academic; for the motive is to try and understand how, in practice, one may evolve the documentary form – indeed, the cinematic form, generally – in such a way as to deal with experiences not sufficiently touched by the form as it is currently generally practiced.

At the heart of such an exploration lie a number of questions. How can one employ a practical approach to cinematic documentary narrative which goes beyond the dominant paradigm exemplified by elements such as cause and effect, conflict and resolution, and psychologically explicable situations, character motivations and narrative motivations, to

reveal qualities of spirituality and transcendence without reducing these elements to fit a rationale that ultimately contradicts the very nature of these transcendental and spiritual qualities? Within this context, how can one practically create a cinematic documentary narrative that is essentially driven by the experiential rather than by meaning, representation or the illustrative? While certain genres within fiction may bring together some of these elements in an agreed fictional paradigm, how can one bring such elements together within forms of fact?

Why should this be necessary? There are three broad reasons I feel that make such an exploration necessary. First, there is a long term danger in reducing our reflections on life and our lives to dimensions which only exists in planes of materialistic cause and effect. A society and culture will be starved, wither and eventually die if it cannot also breathe in paradigms of the infinite, eternal, mystical and unconscious movements of existence. Knowledge is something we all seek, yet there are many layers of knowledge which should not be limited by particular kinds of methodology.

T S Elliot suggests that:

‘We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time’ (Eliot 1944: 48)

If knowledge and awareness is a key motivation in creating documentary work, then it is not merely a question of showing the outside world, and its immediate layer beneath, but about getting into the very heart and soul of who we are and what we are.

Second, and in a sense emerging out of the first point, there are many issues and problems that we face that cannot be adequately solved or moved forward exclusively by looking at them in terms of material, sociological or psychological interactions. We need to look at such problems in a deeper, more holistic light, bringing into the fray the spiritual and transcendental<sup>i</sup>.

Third, if the language of documentary does not evolve and change, there is a real danger that the form will become a hollow expression, built on clichés and that it will cease to be an effective tool of understanding and knowledge.

While in early British documentary, there were some attempts to discover the poetry of documentary<sup>ii</sup>, much of contemporary documentary is confined to a perspective on life in which the factual is primarily what can empirically be observed, then supported by the psychologically explicable. Social realism, observational documentary and interview-based documentary are examples of variations of a genre which broadly lives within the same classical paradigm of cause and effect, conflict and resolution.

There are a number of, usually, non-UK examples of documentary which have attempted to break away from this paradigm: the late Jean Rouch, for example, whose work in Africa shows how the documentary has the potential to go beyond the material surface of the world to reveal a spiritual dimension; or Dvortsevov, whose work<sup>iii</sup> sees him move away from any notion of cause and effect, conflict and resolution in order to reveal a dimension of life which social realism cannot adequately reveal or portray.

While most of the world rushes headlong into embracing a largely materialistic engagement and perspective on life, some parts of the world still have remnants of cultures in which the spiritual, the mental and the physical occupy equal status in epistemology. In African and Latin American literature, for example, we often hear commentators from the developed world using terminology such as ‘magical realism’ to describe a seamless blending of realism, mysticism, magic, fact, history, politics and morality in the creation of cultural product. For the traditional African, though, the label is irrelevant; for it is all fact, all true. While African literature grew out of existing oral traditions and has never required the up-front investment that film has required it has been able, to a large degree, to reflect more accurately the spiritual and transcendental qualities of African life, there is little or no evidence of African documentaries having done so.

Nor is there much evidence of British documentary consistently attempting to reflect the spiritual and transcendental aspects of the British. Arguably, British documentary has

generally been in decline during the later two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in terms of the breadth and depth of what is produced. The commercial climate of contemporary television, the traditional funder of much important documentary work of the past, has seen an increased dependence on formulas which reinforce the need for drama, conflict and explicable cause and effect.

The problem, and the solution, to the different kind of documentary I am suggesting in this piece starts with the question of reality and the question of why we are making documentaries in the first place.

[READ THE REST OF THIS CHAPTER AND THE BOOK, RETHINKING DOCUMENTARY.](#)

<sup>i</sup> In the liberal, consumer led societies of the developed world, we have a tendency to link our material success with progress. However, one need only look at the immense interest of many people from these so called successful societies in so called ‘primitive’ cultures’ relationships to nature and the spiritual as indications that many people feel a sense of alienation from key aspects of their lives.

<sup>ii</sup> Humphrey Jennings, for example.

<sup>iii</sup> Bread Day (Sergei Dvortsevov , 2001, Russia) or In The Dark (Sergei Dvortsevov, 2005, Russia) are good examples. Additionally, ‘Tische’ (Victor Kossakovsky, 2002, Russia) serves as another example. Neither filmmaker may use such a term as ‘transcendental realism’ to describe their own work, but there are hints and similarities in intention. See Kossakovsky’s discussion with Maxine Baker. (Baker 2006: 177).