



Truth, Reality, and Fiction in the Documentary of Errol Morris Refiguring Platonism in Epistemology and Aesthetics

Shai Biderman

Tel Aviv University and Beit-Berl College, Israel

bidermans@post.tau.ac.il

Abstract: This essay contests the status of Plato as a decisive commentator at the intersection of epistemology and philosophical aesthetics, and questions to what extent Plato's positions and practices align with that is generally called Platonism in contemporary philosophical discussions. Current discussions on the philosophical relevance of film often ignore the particular features of documentary in the genre of film-philosophy, in particular the idea that films are philosophical with regard to an ethical domain. The case of Errol Morris is discussed at some length, demonstrating the ways in which a reconsideration of truth and image, in relation to production and representation through Plato and Platonism demand a deeper engagement with documentary.

Keywords: Platonism; cinema; documentary; truth; self-representation; performativity; facticity; film-philosophy.

In his manifesto *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen), the film critic and film director Alexandre Astruc suggested that cinema can and should be considered as "a means of expression."¹ Astruc believes that film, by virtue of its aesthetic nature, should be considered as a supreme resource for "the most philosophical meditations on human production" (*BNA* 19) and continues, "contemporary ideas and philosophies of life are such that only the cinema can do justice to them" (*BNA* 19). I take this to mean that in Astruc's vision, cinema can do much more than merely express ready-made and pre-cooked philosophical ideas. It can facilitate thinking, and engage with the world as a unique tool for raising awareness, irreducible to language or established philosophical concepts.

This manifesto has become an intriguing reality in the contemporary age of film-philosophy. Current film theory has evolved since its inception in the 1970s due to a paradigmatic shift in film-philosophy when the established hegemony of grand theory and analytic philosophy was challenged by moving beyond asymmetric relations that are traditionally embedded in the so-called philosophy-of-X-paradigm, which is generally understood as being Platonic or Platonist.² Instead, using the words of Robert Sinnerbrink, film-philosophy promotes "an alternative approach that combines aesthetic receptivity to film with philosophically informed reflection."³ Film-philosophy, as "a way of aesthetically disclosing, perhaps also transforming, our experience of the modern world"

¹ Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo," in *The New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, ed. Peter Graham, Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1968 pp. 16-23, here p. 17. [Henceforth cited as *BNA*]

² By these monikers I refer to the legacy within the tradition of philosophical aesthetics thus named.

³ Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images*, London and New York, Continuum 2011, p. 3.

(*NPF* 3), is a way, an incentive (one can say), for philosophy itself "to reflect upon its own limits or even to experiment with new forms of philosophical expression" (*NPF* 3). (3) Following Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze, both of which are trailblazers in film-philosophy, many others have taken this new approach to mark the new brand of philosophy. For instance, Daniel Frampton provides a unique portrayal of the cinematic thinking, going so far as to replace the hyphenated relationship between film and philosophy with the unified neologism "filmosophy," in an attempt to conjoin the attributes of thinking and the aesthetic domain under one conceptual roof.⁴ Similarly, Stephen Mulhall refers to the cinematic domain as "philosophy in action," thus delineating the aesthetic dimension of the image as the typological core of a new brand of thinking.⁵

However, and despite enthusiasm, one cannot help but notice a restrictive tendency within the practice of film-philosophy. While claiming for generality, most film-philosophers have focused solely on fiction films in their pursuit of cinematic thinking. Mulhall, for instance, embeds his famous claim in a thorough analysis of the *Alien* tetralogy (*OF passim*); Cavell writes on fiction, melodrama, and comedies of remarriage; Deleuze engages numerous Hollywood and European fiction films in the articulation of time-image,⁶ and others follow the former, by writing predominantly on masterpieces of recent decades, from Frank Capra and Alfred Hitchcock to Orson Wells and Jean-Luc Godard. With but a few exceptions, it is evident that any generic claim for cinematic thinking ignores a crucial phenomenon of the cinematic world, namely, that of documentary cinema.

The practice of documentary—which John Grierson depicts as "a creative treatment of actuality"⁷—installs the most adamant relations film has with the highly charged philosophical concepts of truth, reality, and the real. These relations are at the heart of the documentary practice, and are essential to any

working definition of documentary cinema. Claiming that documentary cinema is an aesthetic endeavor most suitable for the kind of philosophical quest engraved in our sense of Platonic epistemology, however, poses a problem. To cast documentary as an aesthetic form most suited for the philosophical quest for truth we are prompted to define this practice along similar epistemic lines, as Carl Platinga and Gregory Currie have done. In so doing, a vicious circle is constructed that overrides the possibility of the practice it aims to sustain.

What is Documentary?

Platonic Premises and Cinematic Conclusions

The search for defining conditions to map the evasive concept of documentary cinema traditionally has yielded two types of approaches: (1) the documentary as non-fiction approach (the liminal approach), according to which the answer to the "What is documentary?" question will be found within the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy; and (2) the documentary as traces-of-the-real approach (the assertive approach), which centers on the affirmative attempt to define documentary cinema through its relations with reality, the real, and the representation of truth.

Some, like Curry, see these approaches as perpetuating the differentiation between style and content. Others, like Platinga, see them as stemming from the distinction between realism and formalism. One way or the other, these approaches indicate the inquisitive method by which we formulate the question; namely, they are the natural response to the Platonic "what is X?" type of questions which are themselves the offspring of the "philosophy of X" paradigm. I submit that these approaches yield no sufficient answer, as I will show below that they are inadequate to the point of self-contradiction. To this end I will make use of a new method of questioning, since the failure of these traditional intellectual tools, I intend to claim, is predicated in the manner by which questions are formed. In order to embrace cinematic documentary within the conceptual framework of film-philosophy a reframing of questioning is appropriate where the inadequate "What is documentary?" question is being replaced with "What (or Who) is the documentarian?"

I first address the liminal approach. Traces of this approach can already be found in the work of the first cinematographers, for example in the one-minute shorts *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895) and *The Gardener* (1895), both by the Lumière Brothers. In

⁴ Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006.

⁵ Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*, London, UK: Routledge, 2001. [Henceforth cited as *OF*]

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, London, UK: Athlone, 1989.

⁷ John Grierson and Forsyth Hardy, *Grierson on Documentary*, New York, NY: Praeger, 1971. [Henceforth cited as *GD*]

Workers Leaving the Factory a group of workers is seen as they leave a factory at the end of a day's work. In *The Gardener*, by contrast, although seeing a gardener attending his garden, something else is happening on the screen as well: a story. It is brief and simply structured and lacking all those cinematic techniques that will later become the hallmark of this medium: editing, montage, camera angles, and so on. A gardener is busy with his daily work, failing to notice a rascal who steps on his hose, thus stopping the stream from watering the garden-beds. When the gardener finally notices the hoax, it is already too late to prevent the inevitable: he is all wet, and the viewers can only take comfort by the fact that the rascal is amusingly spanked.

The difference between the two films can intuitively be characterized and classified as the difference between fiction film and documentary. *The Gardener* presents a work of orchestrated fiction, in which fictitious characters play a role in a well-structured narrated fable. *The Workers*, by contrast, presents reality for what it is. The camera presides in the actual world, documenting a real event that takes place in front of its lenses. Which variables (if any) account for the distinction between fact and fiction?

By introducing hypothetical variables, a skeptic might claim that there is nothing necessarily natural, or authentic, or true, or real in the march of the workers. It could very well be unreal or inauthentic if the videographer actually turns out to be a filmmaker who mediates the recorded content. Truth be told, this is actually what have happened on the seemingly unmediated stage of *The Workers*. According to witnesses, the Lumière Brothers have shot several takes of this event, each time shouting directions and orders at the workers.

I mention these two films by the Lumière Brothers to flesh out the inconsistencies of the liminal approach. By raising the question, "What is documentary?" a liminal answer presents itself immediately, "Documentary is non-fiction." This answer is maintained despite strong evidence to the contrary. The initial distinction of classifying *The Gardner* as a work of fiction and *The Workers* as a distinctive work of non-fiction that is later to be dubbed "documentary," appears to be satisfactory. Leaving aside intentional deceit by the videographer, the cinematic events presented in *The Workers* are intertwined with preconceived concepts of factuality, as contemplated and defined philosophically. The cinematic events in *The Gardener*, by contrast, are intertwined with another preconceived concept,

namely, fiction, thus being ontologically different from what is believed to be the real world. This preconceived notion of actuality, of the real, and of the possibility to truly and accurately represent them cinematically, is grounded in the way documentaries are conceived and defined, and is embedded in an unchallenged dichotomy between documentary and fiction film.

This unchallenged dichotomy beguiles the liminal approach. Alluding to the non-fictitious nature of a documentary has to account for what Michael Renov identifies as the various tropes and rhetorical figures that are embedded in the documentary means of representation.⁸ Narrative tropes such as irony, comedy, and tragedy, and dramatic devices such as closure and emphasis, and specifically filmic devices such as editing and flashbacks are not only common in documentary, but are in fact indicative to what documentary supposedly is. The documentary as non-fiction paradigm has therefore restricted itself to preordained ubiquitous accounts of documentary, which, according to Bill Nichols, annul the alleged categorical difference between fiction and documentary. Such accounts are redundant, if only because they pragmatically assert that "every film is fiction (including documentary)" and, similarly, that "every film is documentary (including fiction)."⁹ Though Carl Plantinga dismisses such accounts by aiming to save documentary from oblivion, others take them to be the hallmark of what Brian Winston calls "the crisis of legitimacy" in documentary,¹⁰ such as William Guynn, who claims that documentary is "no more than a fiction that is constituted to cover or disavow its own fictionality."¹¹ Similarly, remarking on Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), the first film to be considered a documentary, William Rothman asserts, "the only fiction about it is that it is not fiction, and its only truth is that it is complete fiction."¹²

⁸ Michael Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*, New York, NY: Routledge, 1993.

⁹ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1991, p. 1. [Henceforth cited as RR]

¹⁰ Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and its Legitimations*, London, UK: British Film Institute 1995, p. 253. [Henceforth cited as GDL]

¹¹ William Guynn, *A Cinema of Nonfiction*, Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press 1990, p. 17.

¹² William Rothman, "Nanook of the North," in *Documentary Film Classics*, ed. William Rothman, New York, NY: University of Cambridge Press 1995, pp. 1-20, here p. 18.

A reclamation of the "What is documentary?" question is, among other possibilities, also found in the compelling relations between documentary and the real, which is characteristic of the assertive approach. In his comprehensive typological attempts to articulate this approach, Plantinga identifies two complementary senses in which the concept of truth maintains its role in the articulation of the documentary image, may they be called the semantic and pragmatic sense, to govern analytic accounts of documentary. The semantic sense is exemplified in Gregory Currie's "documentary-as-trace" account, or as Plantinga calls it, the Documentary as Indexical Record (DIR). While assuming the transparency of the medium, Currie focuses on the representational role of the documentary image, thus denoting this role to be a trace of reality, as opposed to the images of fiction films, which are traces of drama or narrative.¹³ Contrary to Currie, Noël Carroll offers an epistemic-pragmatic "communicative action" account, or as Plantinga calls it, the Documentary as Assertion (AD), which engages documentary as a mode of reception. Carroll's intention-response model of communication addresses the way by which the cinematic image conveys its messages. While properly indexing these messages as instances of reality, the filmmaker communicates images to the audience on the assumption that the communication is perceived as being categorically different from fiction. For this reason, the nonfiction discourse "may imply *the broad truths found in fiction*, but also asserts its particulars to be true."¹⁴

While criticizing primarily the DIR account, Plantinga proposes a re-adjustment of the AD account, which he calls Asserted Veridical Representation (AVR). Following Branigan's notion of the documentary as a method or "procedure for making decisions about assigning reference,"¹⁵ as well as Grierson's definition of documentary as "a creative treatment of actuality" (GD 13), Plantinga points toward the conventional

sense by which documentaries are recognized. These conventions arise from the need to match the implicit directorial assertions with the viewer's expectations from those assertions, namely, that those assertions, inasmuch as they are produced under the title of a documentary, will offer "a reliable record, account of, argument about, or analysis of some element of the actual world."¹⁶ "When a filmmaker presents a film as a documentary," Plantinga continues, "he or she not only intends that the audience come to form certain beliefs, but also implicitly asserts something about the use of the medium itself" (WDI 111). These assertions, Plantinga concludes, inasmuch as they are shown and not merely told, are themselves a reliable approximation of the look, sound, and feel of the pro-filmic event, or, at least, are expected to be perceived as such.

Despite being somewhat open-ended, and despite the role assigned to convention (and conventionality) in the articulation of the documentary style, Plantinga's account is nevertheless committed to the same dispositions of truth and reality as are the other accounts. Hence, each of the above mentioned accounts maintain the same hold of truth over documentary. Resting on Nichols' typology, each of the suggested definitions of documentary identifies a different set of concerns that stems from a different starting point regarding the nature and location of the so-called evasive traces of truth (RR 12-3). In Currie's DIR, truth is encoded in the documentary text itself; in Carroll's AD, truth is in the point of view of the filmmaker; and in Plantinga's AVR, truth is in the eyes of the viewer.

Despite their differences in orientation, all three accounts are committed to the role of documentary as representing traces of reality, thus presupposing the conceptual and factual accuracy of truth. However, I believe that truth is not factually accurate, but obsolete, unattainable, and fluid. The indecisive fluidity of truth and the plurality of complementary accounts are reminiscent of Winston's warning regarding a crisis of legitimacy in the concept of documentary (GDL 253). For Winston, this crisis is the immanent result of the false claim, according to which the documentary can capture the real. Yet, one cannot capture the real, since no real is there to be captured. Upholding this notion of the real, while sustaining a conceptual and factual accuracy of truth, disregards the vital component in

¹³ Gregory Currie, "Narrative Desire," in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, eds. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 1999, pp. 183-99, here p. 185.

¹⁴ Noël Carroll, "Photographic Traces and Documentary Films: Comments for Gregory Currie," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58/3 (Summer 2000), 303-306, here p. 304.

¹⁵ Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, New York, NY: Routledge 1992, p. 193.

¹⁶ Carl Plantinga, "What a Documentary Is, After All," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63/2 (Spring 2005) 105-117, here p. 111. [Henceforth cited as WDI]

Grierson's definition, namely, the artistic creativity by which actuality is attained. His "creative treatment of actuality" undermines any preconceived notion of actuality itself. By failing to acknowledge this necessary shift in perspective, the above-mentioned insufficient dichotomy is perpetuated.

The crisis of defining "documentary" lies not within the various answers, but within the question itself; it belongs to the "philosophy of X" paradigm that has become obsolete once it is understood that there is no conclusive answer to this initial question. Instead, a new way of framing the question is in place: "Who is the documentarian?" It comes as no surprise that this question—as the epitome of the film-philosophy approach—already lingers in the postscript of *caméra-stylo*. Echoing the playful depiction of the literary scholar Maurice Nadeau, who suggested, "If Descartes lived today, he would write novels" (BNA 19), Astruc comments on Nadeau's vision by stating,

a Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16mm camera and some film, and would be writing his philosophy on film: for his *Discours de la Méthode* would today be of such a kind that only the cinema could express it satisfactorily. [BNA 19]

This comment is often taken to be a mere illustration to the major claim. However, I suggest that Astruc's comment in *caméra-stylo* is not an exemplary supplement to Nadeau's claim about Descartes' likely literary output, but is an independent and complementary addition to the overall claim. In fact, Astruc's extension of Nadeau shifts the original assertion from one in which Descartes' philosophy of introspection finds fulfillment in the novel to one in which Descartes would change not just the form but also the material basis of his output: from the written word to the moving image. Using Descartes as the protagonist for this playful assertion is all but accidental. Descartes is a predominant figure in Western philosophy. His methodical endeavor, his philosophical mode of investigation, as well as his significance for modern subjectivity, have earned him the title Father of Modern Philosophy. Descartes created the bridge between Ancient and Modern Philosophy, by systematizing and conceptualizing the Platonic "What is X?" tradition, and by centering the philosophical endeavor on the argumentative methods by which one should approach such Platonic questions. However—and here is where in my opinion the second, more subversive, claim of the manifesto stems from—

the Cartesian method along with its correlative picture of philosophy, is missing the most practically evasive element, which is present in all the Platonic dialogues and, more importantly, in the dialogue structure itself: the inability to reach a definite answer to any question at hand. Platonic questions always ended in *aporia*. This adds relevance to the portrayal of a hypothetical Descartes as a cinematographer, solipsistic, yet highly and acutely engaged with the world through his camera-lens philosophy, as it provides a significant example for film as a means to philosophize. It is an innovative way to explicate philosophy as the work of a documentarian.

What is a Documentarian? The Cinema of Errol Morris

Errol Morris is highly esteemed in the documentary scene as the auteur of many masterpieces, including *Vernon, Florida* (1981), *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), *A Brief History of Time* (1991), and *Mr. Death* (1999). Despite the unique documentary achievements of these films, I will examine the embedded relations between documentary and film-philosophy in two of his more recent films, *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003) and *The Unknown Known* (2013). Both films present the political and ethical biographies of United States government officials, secretaries of defense Robert McNamara (1961-1968) and Donald Rumsfeld (1975-1977 and 2001-2006). The schematic similarity between the two politicians is obvious: both were powerful individuals, who played key roles in major crises in recent American history. Besides the official accounts of their roles in various political events, there is another striking similarity between the two. Both politicians have a story to tell, their own perspective of these events, their way of retelling history, justifying their actions, explaining their decisions, and ultimately recreating reality in the image of their justificatory systems. Both share these perspectives generously with filmmaker Morris, who is an absent presence in his films, interviewing them through an apparatus of his own invention, which he calls the Interrotron. A system of cameras and mirrors, the Interrotron enables interviewer and interviewee to stare directly both at the camera and at each other. The Interrotron enables the interviewee and the interviewer alike to merge with the camera, which, in turn, merges with the spectator's gaze. This merger of the unseen interviewer, the direct gaze of the interviewee, the camera, and the spectator's

experiencing via the Interrotron creates a similar situation that Caetlin Benson-Allott describes in her review of Morris' *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008) as leaving "its viewer uncertain about the images' ability to reveal unmediated truths."¹⁷

Although the Interrotron extends the philosophical capacities of the cinematic apparatus, Morris does not give up on traditional techniques, for instance, selecting different shot types such as switching between various degrees of close-ups, or variation in proportionality of frame design, such as positioning the characters at different points across the frame. Morris occasionally surprises the audience with different camera angles or through devices other than the Interrotron, like various kinds of mirrors. The cognitive dissonance between the unified, seemingly objective, direct access of the Interrotron, and the polyphonic variations in the sudden absence of this device provides for the viewer a perspectival dissonance.

Adding this visual impact to the viewer's political persuasions when assessing the two politicians' justifications, I find it fair to suggest that Morris achieved a state of philosophical experience, or philosophy in action to use Mulhall's phrase. However, while the political and ethical questions and justifications of the two politicians are made accessible to the viewer from the words used and the language that is constructed, the epistemic conundrum, if it is to occur while watching these films, is the result of the film's imagistic and pictorial nature. In other words, when it comes to epistemic questions regarding the sustainability and coherency of truth, the documentary image adds a relevant dimension to the documented word.

This important interplay between word and image is indeed one of Morris' greater achievements, and one of his signature contributions to cinematography. Morris shrinks the interface between word and image, where the concept of truth is collapsed and reconstructed, by turning the image into a word of its own right. A word is spoken, and also presented – yet its imaging bestows new dimensions and new layers of meaning to the word, magnifying and empowering the epistemological insight of the viewer. In Morris' documentary *The Fog of War* (2003) for example, McNamara refers to Lesson Nine of the eleven lessons he has learned in life and wants to share as truth with the next generations: in

order to do good, you may have to engage in evil. To support his argument and justify his choices, principles, and thoughts, he uses the terms "ethical truth," "moral law," and "free will." Just as McNamara explains these terms, Morris uses close-up photography and other techniques to add visual information that is sometimes complementary or consistent with McNamara but more often challenges and undercuts him.

Morris uses this strategy to even greater effect in *Unknown Known*, adding animation to words, throwing them one at the other, shattering the words literally as well as figuratively as he challenges their meaning and distinct validity. This effect is particularly powerful in *Unknown Known* since Rumsfeld, unlike McNamara, is a man of words. He defines himself exhaustively using verbose details, and boasts his reputation as the most voluminous memo-writer in the history of the US government. These memos – their linguistic and imagistic presence rather than their content – are fundamental to the challenge posed to us by Rumsfeld, and posed to him by Morris: coming face to face with the feasibility and variability of truth claims.

Morris continues to disturb Rumsfeld's words, pitting them against each other, throwing them to the edge of the abyss, and visually confronting their dictionary definition with the way the politician uses them. This approach culminates with Morris' abuse of Rumsfeld's narration strategy, the wordplay "known unknown" that gives the film its name. Rumsfeld said these words, without at all being playful about it, at a 2002 Press conference in the Pentagon, in response to a reporter's question, doubting the presence of WMD in Iraq:

Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.¹⁸

Morris presents Rumsfeld's answer, but also mercilessly

¹⁷ Caetlin Benson-Allott, "Standard Operating Procedure: Mediating Torture," *Film Quarterly* 62/4 (Summer 2009), 39-44, here p. 39.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, News Transcript February 12, 2002, DoD News Briefing – Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers, <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>. Last accessed 19 July 2018.

tortures the words as images: first, he isolates them from the sentence, and then he breaks them into their grammatical components and starts irritably throwing them at each other to form various combinations, interpretations, and meanings only one of which is Rumsfeld's.

Conclusion

What Morris does to words, to images, to words as images, and to images as words, can aptly be characterized as a full embodiment of film-philosophy indoctrination within the domain of documentary cinema. With this I maintain that the traditional search for definitions of words like documentary, truth, or real, along with their interconnectivity that originates in their Platonic epistemic heritage, has rechanneled itself to a new domain, the domain of the image. Philosophical traditions that were thus far omitted by their own preconceptions and analytical dispositions, are required to face the most intelligible (yet, conspicuously evasive) aspect of documentary praxis: its conceptual entanglement with philosophy itself, namely, its being a philosophical tradition in its own terms. This entanglement of documentary with philosophy suggests that truth claims are interpretative,

fluid, pragmatic, and lucid. In fact, and even more so, it reconfigures truth claims as temporary, and their visual representation as phantasma. Similarly, it introduces a new perspective that sees documentary cinema as a form of philosophy that adds insightful constructions to the enigma of truth. To paraphrase Jean-Luc Nancy, through the documentarian lenses truth is unveiled as an unsustainable singularity, whose image is but a fading motion of detachment. The documentarian—to keep with Nancy's distinction—like the first painter,

sees himself, and the world along with him, come toward self like the one he never was and never will be, like the stranger come from nowhere and going nowhere, therefore neither coming nor going, but simply posed, detached, isolated by a line in front of self.¹⁹

As, perhaps, the nearest adherent to Descartes' introspective method, the documentarian presents not the truth inherent in the outer world (as if such were possible), but the truth of this filmmaker's experience and representation of such a world.

¹⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1996, p. 77.