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Discourse of Sobriety

An Analysis of Four Documentary Films and How They Represent Reality

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Subject, purpose, problem- and question-formulation

The objective of this essay is to discuss the discourses of sobriety Bill Nichols claims documentary films to have and at the same time attempt to discuss the credibility of documentary films and how the aesthetic choices involved in making these films affect the credibility of the film.¹ I hope to be able to create a better understanding for what it is that makes a documentary film credible and test Bill Nichols assumptions regarding the genre of documentary film by applying the same kind of theories to newer more experimental and unorthodox documentaries.

I will be analysing four documentary non-fiction films in an attempt to examine whether or not Nichols statements hold up when applied to e.g. animated documentary films such as “*Is the Man Who Is Tall Happy?: An Animated conversation with Noam Chomsky*” (Michel Gondry, 2013) or “*Waltz with Bashir*” (Ari Folman, 2008).

The questions I will attempt to answer with this essay concerns the ethical and theoretical side of documentary filmmaking. I will take a closer look on multiple non-fiction films with a wide variety of styles attempting to answer:

- How do these discourses of sobriety manifest themselves in modern documentary films?
- How is this “sobriety” affected by the introduction of an aesthetic element associated with fiction such as animation?

I believe that these are important question to ask considering the nature of documentary film and the audience’s expectation of it being, as Nichols puts it “...able to trust to the indexical linkage between what we see and what occurred before the camera...”²

These expectations make it that much more interesting to ask the question what happens when none of it occurs “before the camera”.

¹ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Bloomington, IN:Indiana University Press 2001 p. 39

² Ibid

Material and sources

There has been a good amount of research done on the topic of documentary filmmaking, perhaps the most influential and widely recognized being the work of Bill Nichols. In his book “*Introduction to Documentary*” he developed his ideas concerning documentary modes and introduced the term “discourse of sobriety”, which is going to be central to my essay. Bill Nichols theories in general will play a major role in this essay and I will mainly be discussing the films in relation to these theories. In the later part of this essay I will also be using Annabelle Honess Roe’s book “*Animated Documentary*” and relying on her research on the subject of animated documentary films in discussing the two animated documentaries I have picked.

I will primarily be using the aforementioned “*Introduction to Documentary*”, “*The Subject of Documentary*” by Michael Renov and Stella Bruzzi’s book “*New Documentary*” along with various relevant articles and chapters written by Nichols and Renov as a basis for this essay.

I will also be analysing four documentary films: “*Waltz with Bashir*” (Ari Folman, 2008), “*Inside Job*” (Charles Ferguson, 2010), “*Is the Man Who Is Tall Happy?: An Animated Conversation with Noam Chomsky*” (Michel Gondry, 2013) and “*Citizenfour*” (Laura Poitras, 2014).

I have chosen these films on the basis of being critically acclaimed and award winning documentaries (three of these films have won Oscars for best documentary feature) made in the past 10 years. I have also attempted to choose a wide variety of films with distinctive styles so that there is room for comparison between the extreme opposites, some being more conventional documentaries such as *Inside Job* and *Citizenfour* and on the other hand we have the more unorthodox films such as *Waltz in Bashir*.

The reason for only picking newer films made in the last 10 years is that most of Nichols’ and Renov’s research concerns films that can be considered classics within the genre of documentary film, even though their theories can be applied to most non-fiction films they seem to more or less exclusively use canonized works as examples in their texts. Stella Bruzzi on the other hand focuses on “new documentary” but considering the fact that her book *New Documentary* was published in 2000 the new films being referred to are all between 15 and 35 years old.

In picking the films that will serve as the primary material and the subject of analysis in this essay I set out to pick films where the source of credibility might differ from film to film. I wanted to have one conventional, what Nichols might call participatory, documentary where it will be easy to apply Nichols theories and account for its source of credibility, both *Inside Job* and *Citizenfour* will be used as examples of this conventional and established style of documentary.

Both *Is the Man Who Is Tall Happy?* and *Waltz with Bashir* were chosen because of their unorthodox nature and despite both being animated I believe that both will offer an unique insight into the world of experimental documentary film. Even though Nichols does discuss experimental documentary films such as *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) I believe it will be a challenge to apply his theories to these films, especially *Waltz with Bashir*, even if these films prove to fall outside of Nichols definition of documentary I hope to at least be able to discuss how and why it falls outside of Nichols definition.

Theory and Method

As I have previously discussed I will be relying heavily on the work of Bill Nichols, both his stylistic categorisations and his discussions regarding the documental value and nature of documentary film. This does not mean that I will blindly be applying his thoughts on new films. Instead I hope to challenge and test these theories and ideas in an attempt to update and expose potential weaknesses.

To be able to do this I will first have to explain what I mean when I use terms such as e.g. *observational-*, *reflexive*-documentary or discourse of sobriety. Therefore I will start this essay off by explaining each of Nichols six documentary modes starting with the poetic mode which Nichols claims, in his Darwinian analysis of documentary, to be the first mode of documentary.

The Poetic Mode

The poetic mode is a somewhat experimental approach to filmmaking with a focus on a subjective interpretation of the world around us, focusing on conveying a specific mood and or tone through rhythmic editing. Created out of the experimental nature of Soviet montage and French impressionist cinema and their respective

techniques. Maybe the most famous example of a poetic documentary film is the Nazi-propaganda film *Olympia* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1938), which glorifies the Aryan athletes during the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin. Another notable example of poetic documentary filmmaking is Jean Vigo's *A Propos de Nice* (1930), in this film Jean Vigo managed to develop a documentary voice through the film's rhythm and mood rather than through a didactic approach.

The poetic mode is often criticized for the “absence of “reality””³ in poetic films. Still the aim of films like these is not necessarily to capture the “realness” of an event or encounter in the way Nichols and Renov discuss reality but to capture a subjective truth and convey this to the audience.

The Expository Mode

The expository mode is the mode one most often associates with the documentary genre, the omniscient and all knowing voice over style, often referred to as “voice-of-God commentary”, and the prioritizing of logical argumentation are some of the key traits of the expository mode. The mode does not focus on the aesthetic look or feel of the documentary but rather on the specific talking points of the documentary. Nature documentaries *à la* David Attenborough, are often expository and in this case and in these cases the voice-of-God commentary becomes more of a voice-of-authority in which Attenborough himself becomes the authority-figure walking us (the audience) through the facts and talking points of the film.

The film *Inside Job* (2010), which I will be discussing in more detail later on in this essay, is also an expository documentary film and Matt Damon's narration throughout the film acts as the “voice-of-God” guiding us through the arguments of the film and in a way tells us how to interpret the information given to us.

The Observational Mode

In the late 1950's and early 1960's it became increasingly possible to bring a camera around and film more spontaneous and unplanned events resulting in a new method of filmmaking.⁴ The desire to seize a pure picture of the events that transpired before the camera and a craving to capture the objective truth on film resulted in an observational tendency in many documentary films from the time period.

³ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 138

⁴ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 109

Two major movements embraced this revitalization of Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* and the objective truthfulness it entails, the European and French based *Cinema Verité* and the North American based *Direct Cinema*.⁵ Even though there are some major differences between the two movements their observational nature is undeniable and the main traits of this observational style of filmmaking is the attempt to mask the presence of the camera, the fact that they are being observed by a cameraman is never addressed and it is supposed to not alter the natural behaviour of the subjects, though this notion of objective and unaltered truth has been called in to question by both Nichols and Renov.⁶⁷

In discussing the observational mode Nichols focuses on the *Cinema Verité*, *Direct Cinema* films of the 60's such as *Dont Look Back* (D.A. Pennebaker, 1967) and *Salesman* (Albert Maysles, David Maysles, Charlotte Zwerin, 1968) and in his Darwinian analysis implies a sort of death of the observational cinema and is "rendered obsolete by the advent of more interactive and reflexive modes of non-fiction filmmaking."⁸

Although Nichols may be right about the popularity of a more interactive and reflexive style I find his claim regarding the death of observational non-fiction to be incorrect considering the popularity of docusoaps and films such as *Citizenfour* which do incorporate some more reflexive and interactive features but are still at their core observational.

The Participatory Mode

As the name suggests the participatory mode welcomes participation on the filmmaker's part, thus the filmmaker becomes a central part of the story, interacting with the subjects and driving the story forward. The participatory mode often stresses the interaction between the filmmaker and its subject making him or her a central part of the documentary.⁹

⁵ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 144

⁶ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 111

⁷ Michael Renov, *Re-thinking Documentary: towards a taxonomy of meditation*, Wide Angle 1986 8: 3-4

⁸ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A critical introduction*, London, Routledge 2000 p. 75

⁹ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 117

This participatory style is fairly popular and many critically acclaimed non-fiction films and TV-shows take use of this somewhat personality based mode, Michael Moore's films are all good examples of participatory documentaries as are investigative and journalistic TV-shows such as *VICE on HBO* (2013-).

The Reflexive Mode

While the aforementioned modes focus on the relationship between filmmaker and subject the reflexive mode stresses the interaction between the filmmaker and his/her audience. The film becomes about it self, creating a sort of meta-perspective, in an attempt to discuss the ability of texts such as films to represent the subjects they set out to represent.

Often cited as an influential reflexive and self-aware documentary, Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) shines a light on the process of making a film and invites the audience behind the scenes in an attempt to inform us about the process. Thus it calls on us to reflect over the nature of film as a medium and question the reality constructed for our entertainment by the filmmakers.¹⁰

Even though reflexive films often raise questions worthy of discussion they often run the risk of becoming too abstract in their attempt to discuss the documentary medium.

The Performative Mode

The distinctions between the performative and the participatory mode are somewhat loosely defined by Nichols. However he makes it quite clear that an important aspect of the performative mode is that it does not limit it self to factual information and an objective representation of the world.¹¹ In performative documentaries the filmmaker and his/hers subjective understanding of the problem at hand takes center stage, making the mode inherently personal and in some regards similar to the aforementioned poetic mode.

Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* from 2003 is a good example of the subjective and personal nature of the mode, as could Michael Moore's films although I would

¹⁰ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Bloomington, IN:Indiana University Press 1991 p. 57-58

¹¹ Bill Nichols 2001 p. 130-131

argue that the reporter-esque aesthetics of his films make them better examples of the participatory mode.

Discourse of sobriety

Even though the term was coined by Bill Nichols in his 1991 book *Representing Reality* the idea of sobriety and seriousness in regard to documentary film is far older, already in the early 1940's John Grierson discussed the social importance of documentary film and it's role in framing current social issues.¹² Nichols himself describes the discourse of sobriety as follows:

Documentaries are not documents in the strict sense of the word, but they are based on the document-like quality of elements within them. As an audience we expect to be able both to trust to the indexical linkage between what we see and what occurred before the camera *and* to assess the poetic or rhetorical transformation of this linkage into a commentary or perspective on the world we occupy. We anticipate an oscillation between the recognition of historical reality and the recognition of a representation about it.¹³

He claims this expectation of truth and sobriety to characterize what he dubs to be "discourse of sobriety". In *Representing Reality* he goes further into analysing specific techniques in regard to their associated notion of sobriety, in discussing the on screen one-on-one interview he writes:

It [the interview] arises in relation to more than oral history and it serves far more than one function. Most basically, the interview testifies to a power relation in which institutional hierarchy and regulation pertain to speech itself. As such, the interview figures into most of the fundamental discourses of sobriety, as I have termed' them, and into most of the dominant institutions in our culture.¹⁴

However his analysis of techniques in regard to sobriety is limited to traditional

¹² Pooja Rangan, *For a Critique of the documentary Logic of Sobriety*,
http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_9/Rangan.html (2015-12-07) p. 1-2

¹³ Bill Nichols 2001 p. 38-39

¹⁴ Bill Nichols 1991 p. 50

techniques, coincidentally these techniques are also the ones associated with the more primitive modes in his evolutionary view of the history of documentary film. Because of this evolutionary view Nichols somewhat naively implies that the documentary genre has transcended this notion of objectivity and sobriety and evolved into more reflexive and performative forms.¹⁵

I on the other hand want to argue that all techniques, even those not traditionally associated with non-fiction, based on their context can be used as a source of sobriety in documentary film.

Citizenfour

Citizenfour is Laura Poitras academy award winning documentary film and the third in her trilogy about post-9/11 America (the two previous films being *My Country, My Country* (2006) and *The Oath* (2010)). This time around the focus lays on the NSA surveillance scandal and whistle-blower Edward Snowden, Poitras starts the film off at the beginning of her own involvement in the scandal by showing her encrypted communication with Edward Snowden and shows the way Snowden contacted her in an attempt to find a journalist willing to publish his story. Lacking any film footage of the conversation since the conversation was conducted through encrypted e-mails Poitras chooses to re-enact the conversation as a chat with a black and white coding-like screen, an aesthetic trait Poitras uses throughout the film.

The actual footage was mainly shot in a Hong Kong hotel room during the breaking of the story. Poitras shows Snowden and Glen Greenwald, the guardian journalist publishing Snowden's story, in their first encounter and gives us a behind the scenes look at the breaking of the story and the 8 day period in which Edward Snowden goes from an unknown NSA employee to one of the biggest whistle-blowers of all time.

Even if the film is a fairly straightforward documentary it is hard to categorize it using Bill Nichols categories, parts of the film could definitely fall under the label of participatory documentary. Poitras direct interactions with her subject, that we get to witness, through chat conversations displayed on the screen act as interviews and the ominous voice-over, done by Poitras herself, in the beginning of the movie gives the audience a sense of an involved and active filmmaker. The rest of the film however

¹⁵ Pooja Rangan p. 2

does not entertain this initial notion at all. For instance when we are introduced to the actual shot footage it is in a Hong Kong hotel room Snowden is having a conversation with Glen Greenwald about the precautionary measures that need to be taken in moving forward with the story, a conversation they would have had to have even without a camera present. Laura shoots the eight days in the Hong Kong hotel room in an observational and “fly on the wall” style, without any retries, re-enactments or staged conversations but contrary to Nichols statement that “Observational documentary de-emphasizes persuasion to give us a sense of what it is like to be in given situation but without a sense of what it is like for the filmmaker to be there, too.”¹⁶ The filmmaker’s presence is never denied, even though she is rarely directly addressed and never seen on screen, the at times the hasty camera movements and swift zooming express the feeling of being an observer in a situation such as this which gives the filmmaker an extremely strong voice, as hard to ignore as the voice-of-God style voice-over in the beginning of the film.

As Nichols argues for an evolution of documentary film from somewhat primitive and overly didactic documentaries, which he calls expository documentaries to observational and ultimately to more interactive modes such as the participatory mode stating, “Participatory documentaries add the active engagement of the filmmaker...”¹⁷. However this linear, or evolutionary as Stella Bruzzi calls it in her book *New Documentary*¹⁸, progression does not help us understand the reality of the history of documentary film and the fact that most of the stylistic features associated with the individual modes have been developed and have coexisted throughout periods which Nichols associates with a specific mode, e.g. 1960’s and *observational* documentary.¹⁹

Aesthetically *Citizenfour* looks like an *observational* documentary but still manages to discuss a lot of the topics that Nichols claims are overlooked in observational documentaries. For example Nichols argues that the truth one captures in an observational film is the opposite of the “film truth” (*kinopravda*) Dziga Vertov set out to capture with his reflexive films, that the objective of an *observational* film is to capture the moment as if the camera was not present, making it untruthful in a

¹⁶ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 116

¹⁷ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 123

¹⁸ Stella Bruzzi, 2000 p. 1-2

¹⁹ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 138

sense since there obviously is a camera present, whereas participatory documentaries capture the truth of the encounter rather than some absolute or un-tampered truth.²⁰

Nichols' observations hold some truth if one only considers canonized works such as *Salesman* (Albert Maysles, David Maysles, Charlotte Zwerin, 1968) and *Dont Look Back* (D.A. Pennebaker, 1967) where the directors have gone to extreme lengths to disguise the presence of the film crew at times making it feel as if a lot of things have been cut out to fit the "direct cinema" template.

Citizenfour however, by not obsessing over hiding the fact that it is a film, manages to capture the truth of the encounter without staging interviews and giving up on its aesthetical style. Poitras manages to deliver a feeling that the mood of the room was not altered by her cameras presence. On the other hand listening to interviews with the director of *Dont Look Back*, D.A. Pennebaker, he states that once Bob Dylan understood what kind of film he was trying to make Dylan would spontaneously create situations that would make for an interesting film, making the end result a sort of tampered version of reality,²¹ which is one of the main criticisms toward observational documentaries, but at the same time this knowledge brings another layer to the film, an implicit truth of the encounter between the director and the star. This provides us an opportunity to observe the quiet and unspoken relationship between filmmaker and subject, a attribute Nichols exclusively assigns to more interactive and participatory modes.

Stella Bruzzi states that "... recent evolution in British observational documentary indicate that the puritanism of early direct cinema has been replaced by more realistic expectations that permit the correlation within one film of observational practice and more obtrusive filmic elements."²² Even though Bruzzi bases her observation on the development of British docusoaps I find that her statements rings true on a much wider scale. The sobriety of *Citizenfour* is not called into question because of its breaches from the observational model, instead these breaches gives the audience a notion of the filmmaker not having anything to hide and in fact aids the films notion of sobriety.

²⁰ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 118

²¹ <https://vimeo.com/21664518> (2015-12-09)

²² Stella Bruzzi, 2000 p. 73

Inside Job

This academy award-winning picture from 2010, directed by Charles Ferguson (who also conducts all the interviews in the film), dissects the financial crisis of 07/08, starting the film off with the economic collapse in Island working his way backwards in an attempt to get to the root of the problem, all along interviewing prominent figures within the economic field from all over the world.

The interviews are accompanied by an expository style voice-of-God narration, done by Matt Damon, in a logical and persuasive way this voice-over talks us through the facts and interprets the information presented to us throughout the film. In some, stylistic, regards *Inside Job* and *Citizenfour* are very similar, for instance they both heavily rely on material shot specifically for the film, the small amount of found footage used in the films act as a means of reinforcing the films sobriety and in both cases the found footage used is news footage, a popular technique amongst documentary filmmakers because of the strong documental value of news footage and its ability to strengthen the notion of reality within the film.²³ This shot footage, consisting mainly of interviews, is combined with beautiful establishing shots used in both films as a means of breaking the monotony and in *Inside Job* the sweeping shots of the New York skyline and other striking establishing shots are used in combination with the voice-of-God narration to add to its ominous nature.

Because we associate testimonial interviews with a certain amount of value as evidence these interviews act as sobering elements in what Nichols calls “iconic authentication”.²⁴ This iconic authentication has to do with the way the interviewee is framed and the *mise-en-scène* of the interview, for an example Fergusons interview with the economy professor at Harvard is conducted in a messy office in front of a disorganized bookshelf, catering to our expectations of what the environment of university professors looks like. Nichols argues that the audience is just as susceptible to the visual presentation of a interviewee as to the interview it self,²⁵ both Nichols and Renov stress the importance of the “embodied knowledge” which is not exclusive to the aforementioned iconic authentication but also factors in our need to see and read the person giving the testimony, Renov uses the interviews conducted in the film

²³ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 51

²⁴ Annabelle Honess Roe, *Animated Documentary*, Basingstoke; Macmillan Publishers Limited 2013 p. 76

²⁵ Bill Nichols, *Getting to Know you ...: Knowledge, Power, and the Body*. In Michel Renov, *Theorising Documentary*. London Routledge 1993 p. 174-191

Shoah (Claude Lanzmann, 1985) to explain the intricacies of this visual element and this need to see the testimony as well as hear it.²⁶

Even though *Inside Job*, style wise, is a typical expository documentary with many establishing shots and an ominous narration, an argument can be made for it being a participatory documentary. Considering the fact it is Ferguson, the film's director, conducting the interviews and thus directly participating in his own film, his almost Michael Moore like style of interviewing makes his role in the film that much more intrusive and interactive than the overly didactic and dull interview style Nichols associates with the expository mode.

Much like Michael Moore, Ferguson is not out to give the bankers and economic advisors a voice and a platform to tell their side of the story, *Inside Job* is without a doubt a film with its own voice (arguably Fergusons "voice" even if we are lead to accept a more omniscient and objective voice), a critical and angry voice focused on getting to the root of the issue and a voice not afraid of accusing and pointing fingers.²⁷ Ferguson's interview style becomes increasingly more confrontational throughout the film and his urge to get answers and get to the bottom of the issue becomes more and more tangible towards the end of the film. One could imagine this building frustration and increasing urge to confront the people he feels are somewhat responsible to be a conscious decision on the filmmakers side, to start off in a less controversial fashion and let the audience build up a frustration and invest themselves in the issue and thus become as invested in getting answers and confronting somebody as the filmmaker obviously is. In this case we have already bought in to the films truth claim and by this point the initial sobriety of the film leads us to accept Fergusons worldview and his reasoning, which most of his interviewees do not, leading us to side with Ferguson when the interviewees start questioning his premises and his point of view.

Seeing as the expository mode in and of itself has a sobering quality²⁸, a familiarity one tends to associate with truthful presentations of the animal kingdom or news stories, we as the audience associate a certain amount of objectivity to the expository structure and thus accept the films narrative as an objective recounting of

²⁶ Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2004 p. 126-127

²⁷ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 14

²⁸ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 107

the financial crisis. Where as Fergusons version of the crisis in fact is not as unquestionable as the film might have its audience believe (multiple people have accused Ferguson of oversimplifying the issue and blaming people with political beliefs to the right of his own for the collapse²⁹ ³⁰). This raises an interesting question regarding the “voice of the documentary” as Nichols puts it, since we are lead to believe the claim of objectivity that the expository mode brings while the confrontational nature of the voice of *Inside Job* suggests a certain amount of subjectivity.

In his examination of the way documentary films address social and political issues, Nichols focuses on the representation of suppressed minorities, political confrontation (by the workers themselves or in the form of anti-war protests) and the power of film in regard to the creation and maintenance of national identity.³¹ However the role of documentary film as a means of exposing wrongdoings and regulating those in charge is overlooked in Nichols discussion regarding the connection between the documentary genre and political and/or social issues. In his discussion he tends to focus on the notion of “film from above” and in the few instances where he addresses films in which we hear the voices of the oppressed and marginalized it is in a “we talk about us to them” manner in which the marginalized groups make films about their own experience on the bottom of the social ladder. *Inside Job* however is a documentary that talks about “them to us” without “us” (the audience) being removed from the equation as simply observers, we as the audience are the ones affected by this social injustice and Ferguson does not claim to be one of the people or that it is the voice of the people being heard through out the documentary. Instead he talks from a point of authority, further enhancing the films sobriety by acting as an authoritative figure, in a way taking a page from Michael Moore’s book. However Ferguson refrains from focusing the whole documentary on a personality in the way Moore does and instead choses to focus on the logical argumentation of the film which gives the spectators a illusion of being less subjective, since there is no visible subject to associate the opinions with.

²⁹ <http://spectator.org/articles/38629/inside-job> (2015-12-16)

³⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein/post/what-inside-job-got-wrong/2011/05/19/AGgGoJgH_blog.html (2015-12-16)

³¹ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 163

If we talk in terms of Nichols notion of voice Ferguson steps out of the traditional expository mode's by replacing the dry opinionless voice and instead inserting his own voice in to the already established expository structure in a way using the sobriety associated with the mode to reinforce his own interpretation of the events.

Is The Man Who Is Tall Happy?

Michel Gondry's animated account of his conversations with the renowned linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky, animated by Gondry himself, was released in 2013 and consists of the audio from these conversations and apart from the occasional video of Chomsky the film is completely animated. In the very beginning of the film Gondry justifies his decision to animate the conversations by discussing the manipulative nature of film stating that

"Film and video are both, by their nature, manipulative. The editor or director proposes an assembly of carefully selected segments that he/she has in mind. In other words, the context becomes more important than the content, and, as a result, the voice that appears to come from the subject is actually coming from the filmmaker. That is why I find the process manipulative. The human brain forgets the cuts -- a faculty specifically human that, I will learn, Noam calls "psychic continuity." The brain absorbs a constructed continuity as a reality and, consequently, gets convinced to witness a fair representation of the subject. On the other hand, animation that I decided to use for this film is clearly the interpretation of its author. If messages, or even propaganda, can be delivered, the audience is constantly reminded that they are not watching reality, so it's up to them to decide if they are convinced or not."³²

In choosing to start his film off in such a way Gondry invites his audience to question the legitimacy and truthfulness of not only the subjects discussed but also, and maybe most importantly, the film itself. This transparent approach and desire to avoid any preconceived implications, which could be achieved by simply using a familiar structure, makes *Is The Man Who Is Tall Happy?* stylistically and mode wise the polar opposite of *Inside Job* in the sense that *Inside Job* makes use of well established techniques to meet the audiences expectation and boost its own credibility as an authoritative figure, whereas Gondry instead invites doubt by disregarding and at

³² Michel Gondry, *Is the Man Who Is Tall Happy?*, Partizan Films 2013

times outright avoiding any stylistic choices that might be associated with sobriety or have a sobering effect on the film.

Even though Gondry challenges the style associated with not only documentary film but film in general *Is The Man Who Is Tall Happy?* still fits quite well in to Nichols reflexive mode, in fact stylistically it is much easier to place in one of Nichols modes than any of the previous films.

Gondry's tendency to explain himself and his choices directly to his audience is quite hard to categorize as anything else than reflexive.³³ In the very beginning of the film he motivates his decision to use animation as his main tool throughout the film and approximately half an hour later Gondry fails to get his thoughts across in his conversation with Mr Chomsky, he then once again lets the film grind to a halt and takes his time clarifying what he was trying to say and explains why he decided to keep the misunderstanding in the film anyway. In doing so Gondry once again takes a completely different approach to filmmaking than for instance Ferguson in that he does not rely on his argumentative ability but instead insists on explaining himself to his audience where as Ferguson has complete trust in his own arguments and, most importantly, the audiences ability to pick up on the points he is trying to make, be it through a sarcastic question or a stupid answer. Ferguson uses semiotics and semantics in situations where Gondry instead chooses to pause the film and takes time to explicitly tell us how to interpret what is going on the screen.³⁴ Instead Gondry trusts his earnestness to replace the sobering effects of well-established techniques focusing on not being misunderstood rather than persuading.

Another interesting use of self-reflexivity in the film is Gondry's use of the first interview and his animations of their first conversation as a means of expressing himself and getting his point across to Chomsky in the later interview, letting Chomsky in on the short comments and explanations he gives to his audience and in this way he uses not only the finished film as a means of expressing his point of view but also the unfinished film as a means of expressing himself to his subject.

Gondry is able to, through exclusively auditory means, convey an adequate amount of sobriety to make his audience not interpret his film as a work of fiction but, in spite of their initial impulse to interpret any animation as a fictitious tale, instead

³³ Bill Nichols, 2001 p. 125-126

³⁴ Annabelle Honess Roe, 2013 p. 156

consider the talking points of the film at face value and not believe them because of the authoritative manner in which they were presented.³⁵

According to Honess Roe this can be attributed to the at times neglected, especially when talking about documentary film, indexical value of recorded sound. Honess Roe thus states the sound, and particularly the voice as a “...a bearer of truth and meaning in documentary”³⁶ and even if it would seem only logical that we trust what we see, Honess Roe raises an interesting and important question regarding the affect of aural sources and the sobering effect of these. Analysing Gondry’s film with Honess Roe’s ideas in mind seems to reaffirm her statements, since the only familiar discourse in the film is the one presented through aural means from Gondry and Chomsky’s discussion, whereas all of the visual inputs, even the short and fragmented video recordings of the interview, are either abstract or extremely subjective visual representations of Gondry’s interpretation of the subject discussed. Even here Gondry refrains from letting the audience seek identification from the visual and yet again he forces them to reflect over the fact that what they are seeing is not, and does not set out to be, an objective representation of the “social world”. However Gondry’s film still has an undeniable bond to what Honess Roe calls the social world and Renov calls real (without quotation marks), in regard to Renov’s views of subjectivity of documentary film one could argue (even if Renov at times strongly opposes the notion of documentary being able to represent a true and objective picture of reality³⁷) that the visual elements of *Is The Man Who Is Tall Happy?* portray the filmmakers own subjective views and thus present, what Renov would call, “the real” (a filtered and in some way altered representation of reality) where as the auditory elements, because of their indexical value and sobering effect, would actually, to some extent, be able to represent actual reality without the citation marks.^{38 39}

³⁵ Annabelle Honess Roe, 2013 p. 1

³⁶ Annabelle Honess Roe, 2013 p. 27-28

³⁷ Stella Bruzzi, 2000 p. 3

³⁸ Michael Renov, 2004 p. 98

³⁹ Annabelle Honess Roe, 2013 p. 28-29

Waltz With Bashir

Waltz With Bashir (2008) is an award winning film directed by Ari Folman about the repressed memories of the 1982 Lebanon war and his own involvement in it. The film starts off with Folman in a bar with his friend, Boaz, discussing his friend's nightmares. Boaz tells the story of how he was ordered to execute 26 dogs in order for his unit not to be detected as they entered a Lebanese village and how he for the past two and a half years has had a recurring nightmare about the dogs and how they all wait for him outside his window, barking. Boaz asks Folman about his experience and if he gets any nightmares or flashbacks from the war, considering he was only a couple of hundred yards away from the Sabra and Shatila massacre, Ari replies by saying that those memories are not stored in his "system". This conversation with his friend is the first time in 20 years that he has thought about his experiences in Lebanon and Beirut and he starts "remembering" a dream like sequence of him and two of his friends rising up from the water, naked and with rifles, marching towards the shore, and so he sets out to see if his friends and fellow soldiers remembered anything more.

In some ways *Waltz With Bashir* embodies one of Annebelle Honess Roe's strongest talking points in her discussion regarding animated documentary, its effectiveness in depicting and overcoming traumatic events.⁴⁰ Folman recognizes the therapeutic effect of filmmaking, even though his "character" responds quite dismissively when his friend Boaz suggests it. It is quite obvious that the film had a therapeutic value to Folman and he even interviews a post trauma expert, prof. Zahava Solomon, who tells us the story of one of her patients who was a photographer and used the camera as a way to remove himself from the atrocities surrounding him and once his camera broke he was forced to face the reality of his situation and he started breaking down. This conversation, in a way, serves the same purpose as Gondry's initial justification of his use of animation, this story along with his discussion about memories early on in the film serve as much more subtle justifications and explanations for the fact that the film is animated. They present the ambivalent and easily manipulated nature of memories and the problems this can pose in a documentary film, without explicitly talking about it in terms of film but rather in much wider terms and in regard to memory.

⁴⁰ Annabelle Honess Roe, 2013 p. 155

The major difference between the two films is their connection to the historical world, Gondry's film is a subjective take on a philosophical conversation and their recollections only serve as examples or vehicles for the point they are trying to make, whereas Folman's film deals with the trauma and the film in and of itself is used as a "...vehicle for Folman to explore his suppressed memories..."⁴¹ Renov suggests that traumatic events such as "...the Holocaust offers itself as an aporia for aesthetic representation just as it does for historiography."⁴² Many others have as well noted the "unrepresentability" of traumatic events and thus the tendency towards unorthodox methods in depicting traumatic events.⁴³

In terms of mode this subjective approach to filmmaking lends itself well to more poetic and reflexive films such as *Is The Man Who Is Tall Happy?* or *Man with a Movie Camera* however in *Waltz With Bashir* the absence of any visual differentiation in the portrayal of factually correct scenes, such as the present day interviews, and dreams and hallucinations. Hones Roe notes, "The differences are subtle and ones of feel and atmosphere than look or style. This was a conscious choice by the filmmakers who did not want to prioritise the truth of one component of the film over another."⁴⁴ In this way Folman, perhaps unintentionally but nonetheless noteworthy, takes a stance against the objective truth often discussed in relation to documentary film, the same objectivity and truth both Nichols and Renov discuss in regard to documentary. Folman instead, not unlike Bruzzi, problematizes this puritan way of looking at documentary film and by blurring the line, and thus sacrificing the sobriety of the film, is able to tell a story much closer to his own subjective truth and in telling his own story Folman is able to shine light on the bigger picture.

Even if the objective of documentary films often is to educate about and expose people to its [the films] subject we must not forget that film is a pop cultural entity and the entertainment value of a film is many times crucial to a film's success. In this regard the conventional documentary modes prove to have some limitations and shortcomings, for example Folman tells a story about arriving to the Beirut airport the day before the massacre. He explains how he saw beautiful airplanes from all over the world, luxurious shops and a seemingly endless amount of destinations to

⁴¹ Annabell Honess Roe, 2013 p. 161

⁴² Michael Renov, 2004 p. 161

⁴³ Annabelle Honess Roe, 2013 p. 156

⁴⁴ Annabelle Honess Roe, 2013 p. 163

escape to, all of this is animated just as he is recalling it, up to the point where he realizes all of the airplanes are really just bombed out shells and that the stores have all been looted, in this instance animation enables the filmmaker to portray this dramatic twist in a equally dramatic manner trough visual means in a way that would be very hard to do using for instance found footage.⁴⁵

Being that the film, much like other films that focus on subjective recollections of events, lacks a claim of objectivity and is fairly straight forward with the fact that this is how the filmmaker and the interviewees remember the war and not necessarily how the recollected events actually transpired Folman offers himself more creative freedom than most of the other filmmakers that I have discussed in this essay. Even if Folman is very straight forward with the fact that this is an animated documentary film, by only judging from the film itself one might very well miss the fact that this is a documentary film, this can be attributed to a lack of sobering elements in the beginning of the film, for an example the film starts off with an action filled dream sequence upon which we get to see two friends having a few drinks in a bar, none of these establish the film as non-fictional one.⁴⁶ Here Folman allows himself creative freedom in an attempt to capture his audience and tell a more compelling story, however once he has his audiences attention he begins to introduce sobering elements into the film. Once again the credibility and sobriety is established by turning to traditional and well established documentary techniques, Folman uses the renowned Israeli journalist and war correspondent Ron Ben-Yashai, depicted in a traditional interview setting with three-point lighting against a bland background, to recount the day of the massacre. Considering the fact that Ben-Yashai is an established war journalist he is ascribed the role of an authoritative figure and thus his recollection carries a certain amount of sobriety. Even though Folman is able to convey a feeling of truthfulness with the help of Ben-Yashai and the actual footage of the camps in which the Palestinians were held at the end of the film, this is not Folman's main objective with the film, as Honess Roe puts it "The television news images may reveal the truth of the event of the massacre, but the truth of the experience is, for Folman, as much about its incomprehensibility and his amnesia as about what actually happened."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Annabelle Honess Roe, 2013 p. 157

⁴⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eX9HdTr0OEY> (2016-01-07)

⁴⁷ Annabelle Honess Roe, 2013 p. 168

Discussion

At first glace documentary film and animation might seem like a match made in hell, ones purpose is to depict social events or issues and shine light on society's problems while the other is associated with children's entertainment and fantasy. However analysing the two animated documentaries in this essay, *Is The Man Who Is Tall Happy?* and *Waltz With Bashir*, and looking at the way they are structured proved to be a lot more similar to the orthodox documentary films one usually associates with the genre than I would have expected.

Both films proved fairly easy to categorize using Bill Nichols modes of documentary and a lot of the theoretical ideas and issues regarding documentary raised by Nichols and Renov, such as voice and sobriety, applies to both films in spite of their unorthodox nature. What I have found is that the sobriety of documentary film, however unorthodox and uncharacteristic still comes from the expectation of truth or truthfulness. Filmmakers, whether conventional or not, still turn to, what both Nichols and Honess Roe refer to as, the indexical linkage or value of both pictures and sound to tell their stories. Even though animation offers an alternative to conventional filmmaking in that it rids the filmmaker of the constraints of the physical world both of the directors I have discussed in this essay, Gondry and Folman, chose to still make use of techniques often associated with maybe the most recognizable of the documentary modes, the expository mode, such as face to face interviews with three-point lighting, voice-over, use of authoritative voices etc.

By preserving some of these techniques they avoid alienating their audience while the more experimental techniques offer new and exciting ways of depicting historical or personal events and, in the case of *Waltz With Bashir*, new ways of exploring traumatic and suppressed memories in a therapeutic way. Animation in documentary film is an interesting and useful tool and although its use may hurt the films credibility and its documental value I believe both *Is The Man Who Is Tall Happy?* and *Waltz With Bashir* prove the fact that it doesn't have to.

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Main Films:

Citizenfour

Production company: HBO Films, Participant Media, Praxis Films

Release year: 2014

Director: Laura Poitras

Inside Job

Production company: Sony Pictures Classics

Release year: 2010

Director: Charles Ferguson

Is The Man Who Is Tall Happy?

Production company: Partizan Films

Release year: 2013

Director: Michel Gondry

Waltz With Bashir

Production company: Bridgit Folman Film Gang, Les Films d'Ici,

Razor Film Produktion

Release year: 2008

Director: Ari Folman

Other Films:

Man with a Movie Camera

Production company: VUFKU

Release year: 1929

Director: Dziga Vertov

Olympia

Production company: Olympia Film GmbH

Release year: 1938

Director: Leni Riefenstahl

A Propos de Nice

Production company: Pathé-Natan
Release year: 1930
Director: Jean Vigo

Tarnation

Production company: -
Release year: 2003
Director: Jonathan Caouette

Dont Look Back

Production company: Leacock-Pennebaker
Release year: 1967
Director: D.A. Pennebaker

My Country, My Country

Production company: Praxis Films
Release year: 2006
Director: Laura Poitras

Salesman

Production company: Maysles Films
Release year: 1968
Director: Albert Maysles, David Maysles, Charlotte Zwerin

The Oath

Production company: Praxis Films
Release year: 2010
Director: Laura Poitras

VICE

Production company: Vice Media
Release year: 2013-
Director: Shane Smith, Eddy Moretti

Shoah

Production company: BBC
Release year: 1985
Director: Claude Lanzmann