Part III: “Documentary” Introduction

What makes a film a documentary?

1. It is *not a fiction*.

Problem (from Brian Winston and other postmodernists): if what makes a film *fictional* is that it is *constructed by a filmmaker,* this is no less true of Errol Morris’s *The Thin Blue Line* than of Baz Luhrman’s *Romeo + Juliet*.

2. It *tells the truth* about whatever the film is portraying (in Morris’s film, *what happened in Dallas on November 28, 1976 that led to the death of a police officer and later the conviction of Randall Adams*).

Postmodernist Objections:

a) the film partly portrays those events through *simulations of the events rather than, say, iPhone recordings of the events* ***as they happened***. Morris attempts to *reconstruct from verbal testimony* of various parties involved in the event and trial what happened that night. But these are ***not the events themselves*** (proof: one can question whether Morris’s way of assembling the evidence that leads to **his** interpretation of events [or, rather, that of those who think an injustice was done at that trial], which you **cannot do** quite so easily if someone had recorded the event at the time on their iPhone).

b) filming itself involves selection (where to point the camera determines what you see, and where you *fail to point the camera* is no part of the cinematic ‘world’ presented to the viewer)

c) editing adds another layer of influence over what the viewer sees (Morris himself thinks that there is an unavoidable, even *metaphysical* distance between a documentary covering real events and the real events themselves).

d) documentaries are no less *stylized* than fiction films. Morris’ film was criticized for using reenactment by many critics who thought that ‘crossed the line’ between *legitimate documenting of events* and *illegitimate use of the powers of film fiction* to persuade an audience in a manner that they found illegitimate and incompatible with what *documenting* events should involve.

Carroll challenges this postmodernist assessment of documentary filmmaking of the kind Errol Morris is famous for in *The Thin Blue Line,* and his original and very influential *Gates of Heaven* (which treats of pet cemeteries and the people who lay their pets to rest in one of these cemeteries in California).

For Carroll, what makes a documentary different from film fiction is that it *asserts things,* whereas fiction films like *Blue Velvet* do not make assertions. JP: evidence for this, perhaps, lies in David Lynch’s careerlong refusal to say what his films are *about,* something that certainly would be a **very odd thing for Errol Morris or Michael Moore or other documentary filmmakers to say**.

For Currie, the difference lies in the fact that a film fiction *invite the viewer to* ***imagine*** *a* ***world*** *as portrayed,* a film documentary invites the viewer to *take the world presented as* ***the actual world****.*

For Currie, this arises because the photographic means of generating the film product has a causal relationship to what was *in front of the camera* that contains **traces of the actual events**. JP: In this sense, in Michael Moore’s film *Roger & Me* we are to take what we see and hear as **testimony** concerning what happened in Flint, Michigan during the period when the automobile industry giants like GM and Ford began to suffer from Japanese competitors, which resulted in a severe decline in the economic fortunes of people like Moore’s father who worked in the factories in Flint. (But note that Currie rejects the idea that film documentary should be taken as **testimony** and his reason is that usually someone who testifies in the way one might think is parallel to the way a film documentary *gives testimony* is always infected with **the agent’s interpretation of what they saw,** and this can be undermined if the interpretation of mistaken (think *Rashomon*, where several ‘eye witnesses’ to the same event give very different accounts of what they saw).

Currie acknowledges that a film fiction *also* contains a ‘literal trace’ of what was before the camera (in the case of *North by Northwest,* there is a *literal trace of Cary Grant*. But whereas in that case, there is *also* a **different function** of that literal trace (the *trace of Cary Grant* **also** functions to represent a **fictional character, Roger Thornhill**). This additional function of the photographic traces of what was before the camera is **lacking in documentary films**.

Carroll pokes holes in the correspondence Currie claims to exist between photographic images and the narrative expressed by a documentary film.

1. Documentary filmmakers often substitute ‘generic images of an object’ for an object that is being ‘discussed’ in the narration. In *Thin Blue Line* we see a gun in a scene or two, but we don’t know that this is the gun involved in the shooting. We see a Mercury Comet, but there is no evidence *in the film* that establishes this Comet as *the Comet that Cunningham was driving* the night of the murder. Etc.

2. Currie’s appeal to ‘literal traces’ to secure their function as ‘representations of real things/events’ is weakened by his acknowledgement that a film documentary cannot be comprised *only of literal traces* and so he has to stipulate that a film becomes documentary ‘when the number of literal traces predominates’. Carroll notes that this raises the question: at what exact percentage of literal traces does a film become documentary, or fall rather into film fiction? JP: And it seems obvious that the different function that a film fiction adds to the literal traces of the actors, sets, etc., seems to be undermined when *reenactment* is the dominant mode of presentation [since then, the literal traces seem to includes a symbolic function that undermines its claim to be *a literal trace of what the narrative is supposed to be representing*.

Carroll’s alternative is to say that the difference between documentary and film fiction lies in the former being “a film of presumptive assertion”. Filmmaker and film viewer have ‘a mutual understanding’ about the kind of communication that the film represents between the former and the latter: like the features of natural language in which context tends to determine meaning (as in the situation where a couple are at table eating dinner and there is a knock at the door, to which the wife responds “Could you get that, dear?”….the situation brings with it certain conventions of communication, and the same is true when a viewer enters a theater to see Michael Moore’s latest film: s/he expects to see an attempt to make some *assertions* about something [like the problematic prevalence of guns and fun violence in the United States {cf. *Bowling for Columbine*}]).

How the two views (Currie’s vs. Carroll’s) differ: for Currie, Morris’s use of reenactment is so heavy as to undermine its status as a *proper document* because it doesn’t contain *enough of the presumptive trace* of what the narrative is referring to. For Carroll, this does not undermine Morris’s film as documentary because all that matters is that Morris *intended to make assertions about the real events that occurred o that night in 1976 in Dallas* (and thereafter at the trial).

Another feature of Carroll’s definition of documentary film turns on the ‘propositional content of the implied assertions made in the film’ and these *need not constitute a* ***narrative*** as shown by the fact that some of Lumiére’s ‘actualités’ do not involve strictly conceived narratives, and further, what is distinctive about *narrative* is that the events narrated are taken to have causal relations to each other, which is not necessary to *document* something through film (cf. the poetic documentaries like *Belin: Symphony of a City* (Walter Ruttman, 1927)

Final key point about both Currie’s and Carroll’s view of documentary films: they are capable of being *objective* and *epistemically reliable* (two features that postmodern accounts of documentary films reject as possible. Both Currie and Carroll think this overstates the extent to which the means and methods of filmmaking introduce nonobjective and epistemically unreliable elements in to *each and every documentary film.* JP: The possibility of objective, veridical films of this type seems on its facemistaken given what happened in the case of the *Thin Blue Line* (Randall Adams was eventually exonerated, and Cunningham eventually admitted to having been the one who shot the policeman in Dallas on that night in 1976).