

# Kill the Documentary as We Know It

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SOMEWHAT IRONICALLY, but in all seriousness as well, I here hurl out a *Dogma* for future documentary filmmaking—one that questions the usefulness of the classical realist documentary form as an instrument of publicly shared knowledge.

The *Dogma* is the result of my interrogation of the classical assumptions of documentary filmmaking—that system of cinematic representation that is said to produce sober, unauthored texts, texts through which the world supposedly *tells itself*, without any ideological intervention from its authors. I want to propose, in its place, strategies for rethinking non-fiction cinema as poetry, as speculative fiction, as critique—strategies for media forms that would utilize, *self-consciously*, photographic images from the archive of “the real.” I am not at all ready to abandon making films with these images, but am fearful of the ideology they usually hide. Perhaps my *Dogma*—a slashing away at the very underpinnings of the myth of the real and a critique of the current state of documentary—can be a useful tool for resisting

what we are witnessing today: that form’s swift slide into pornography.

I don’t believe in dogmas. I don’t trust them. This one was first written for myself, in anger, as a kind of black joke, after I read the Danish filmmakers’ “Dogme” for fiction filmmaking. That “Dogme” seemed particularly ridiculous to me because it borrowed some ancient and exhausted conceits from—of all things—the documentary film. These were conceits that, since Lumière and up to the present, have given the documentary film its *pedigree of the real*, its guarantee of truth-telling and authenticity. Though many documentary filmmakers hide behind this pedigree, most know from practice (especially in the editing room) that it is a guarantor of nothing real and a disingenuous declaration of honesty.

The “Dogme” Danes say that in their films the camera must be handheld. There can be no tripods; no inauthentic props; no nondiegetic music; no fancy lighting; etc. The Danish filmmakers seem to be suggesting that if the “Dogme” films abide by these monastic principles and shun the glamorous and seductive tools of Hollywood production, they will be more authentic in some way, more powerful and thus more significant. Though it has been taken as a serious political and aesthetic manifesto by many, my guess is that this “Dogme” was actually conjured up as a publicity stunt (maybe also as a private joke by the filmmakers) to draw press attention to this group of films and to rationalize their non-Hollywood, low-budget production values. The “Dogme” films need no rationalization. The techniques

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they employ are perfectly pragmatic—reasonable strategies for avoiding the burden of two hours of lighting per shot, and a refreshing method for fracturing classic film space with shots grabbed from the set in a provocative and spontaneous manner. These techniques allow those filmmakers to concentrate on performances, and these are remarkably good in the “Dogme” films. Cassavetes did all of these things in his film *Shadows* in 1959, and got great performances as well. He didn’t bother to rationalize them at all.

A friend of mine thinks the Danish “Dogme” is actually intended as a black parody of the cinema verité mode of documentary filmmaking and its truth claims. This makes some sense to me, though I think the parody fails because nothing seems able to dislodge the nonfiction film’s exclusive possession of the real. And it’s this desperate clutching onto the real that keeps documentary filmmakers reproducing, *ad infinitum*, a corrupt form of public knowledge.

I bought into documentary filmmaking in the 1960s, when developments seemed to promise that independent documentary films could become truly useful, maybe even elegant, intellectual instruments, instruments that could produce significant experience, perhaps as important as the experience of reading a book—let’s say a book by Faulkner, Thomas Mann, Primo Levi, or today, J. M. Coetzee. These were to be counter-documents—texts that unraveled or at least poked holes in the representation of the world by the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, and CBS.

Since then, in the US at least, with some exceptions, documentaries have become progressively more sensational, more about titillation and desire, more and more determined by commercial concerns, and untroubled, it seems, by the last twenty years of continental theory, cinema theory, or by any kind of critical or political thinking. How is that possible? My analysis is that these films, whatever their purpose and whatever their appeal, still trade in reality footage as if it were some pure, unassailable essence exclusively their own. In spite of

contemporary techno-innovations now common in documentaries (slick digital effects, sexy music, etc., all of which intrude on the old “purity” of the documentary form), these films all are able to say, and do say, implicitly, about themselves: “Here is reality, and when you’ve seen it—and you *should* see it—you’ll have understood something you need to know.” That is, they all claim the pedigree of the real and all the attributes and privileges of the real.

This is the documentary’s albatross, a handicap that paralyzes the filmmaker’s capacity to think past the surface of reality to profound propositions. It is also what masks the documentary’s natural tendency toward pornography: the “pornography of the real.” Pornography is the objectifying of a graphic image, turning it from a subject into an object, so that the thing or person depicted can be commodified, circulated, and consumed without regard to its status as a subject. By “pornography of the real” I mean the documentary’s exploitation of “real life situations” to produce that titillation of difference which middle-class audiences seem to need and enjoy. This pornographic exploitation of the real offers viewers an unspeakable and unspoken message that encourages them to unconsciously accept, in the movie theater, in the dark, when no one is watching, the secret sentiment best characterized by the phrase, “Thank God that’s not me,” while also encouraging them to peek at the devastated, the distorted, the dispossessed, and the daringly, dramatically different. From *Hunger in America* to *Best Boy* (1979) to *Hoop Dreams* (1994) to *Crumb* (1994) to *Brother’s Keeper* (1992) to *Nobody’s Business* (1996); from Home Box Office programs about crime and autopsies to network “white papers” on Somalia; from Carma Hinton’s PBS series on rural China to almost every film about the Holocaust ever made, the documentary contract stays in place: “Here is reality, and when you’ve seen this—and you *should* see it—you’ll have understood something you need to know.”

Over time, the documentary film has developed many bad habits. I fear it will be as hard to break these habits as it has been for me to

stop smoking, which I haven’t yet. Nevertheless, here is the first part of the *Documentary Film Dogma, 2001*, a list of “Do Nots” aimed at disabling old documentary habits and setting a new course.

1. Do not produce “real” time and space. Your audience is in a movie theater, in comfortable chairs.
2. Do not merely reproduce the surface of things. Make a real analysis, or at least an intelligent proposition, that is larger than the subject of the film. (If you forget to think about this before shooting, find it in the editing room and then put it in the film somehow.)
3. Do not produce freak shows of the oppressed, the different, the criminal, the primitive. Please do not use your compassion as an excuse for social pornography. Leave the poor freaks alone.
4. Do not produce awe for the rich, the famous, the powerful, the talented, the highly successful. They are always everywhere and we feel bad enough about ourselves already. The chance to admire, envy, or hate them in the cinema doesn’t help anybody.
5. Do not make films that celebrate “the old ways” and mourn their loss. Haven’t you yourself enjoyed change? How are the “old ways” people different from you?
6. Keep an eye on your own middle-class bias, and on your audience’s. Do not make a film that feeds it. Remember that you are producing consciousness in people who are vulnerable and alone in the dark.
7. Try not to exploit your social actors. Being seen in your film is not compensation enough for the use of their bodies, voices, and experience. At the very least, do not make them “stand in for something”—a tribe, a class, a gender, a group of victims, a group of heroes or heroines, etc.
8. Do not address an audience of “rational animals.” We (your audience) have not yet managed to control primitive feelings such as hatred, violence, and apathy, or to curb

the urge to exploit the poor and the weak. Do not address us as if we have.

9. Whatever you do, do not make “history.” If you can’t help yourself, try to remember that you’re just telling a story. At the very least, find a way to acknowledge that, and your authorship.
10. Watch that music. What’s it doing? Who is it conning?
11. Leave your parents out of this.

Here’s the big question: how do we know what we “know”? Philosophers, psychologists, and cultural critics have many answers to this question, but classical documentary always answers it this way: if you see it *with your own eyes*, and hear it *with your own ears*, you can understand it, and thus *know* something. And you can *know* it especially if you have seen it in a quasi-scientific, sober form, like the documentary film. The documentary film implicitly speaks of the world as knowable, because it is observable. And of course, if it is observable, it is filmable. So if I show it to you in my film, that is enough.

Here is my retort, in the form of a fable. One day, in his late Cubist period, Picasso was painting a portrait of a woman. One afternoon, the husband of the woman came by the artist’s studio to take her home. He asked to see the painting of his wife and Picasso showed it to him. The husband studied it awhile, then said, “It doesn’t look much like my wife.” Picasso considered this, then asked, “What does your wife look like?” The husband reached into his pocket and brought out his wallet. From the wallet he took out a snapshot of his wife and handed it to the painter, who studied it for a long time, then turned to the husband and said, “I didn’t realize she was so small.”

The world really cannot be represented—at least not by photography. It can be photographed, but though it can be photographed, it cannot be represented. Picasso proved that.

In the documentary cinema, the particular problem with the world-as-knowable idea is that *as you’re seeing* (and theoretically able to be knowing) something about the real world, at



*Nanook of the North:* Nanook can't figure out where the music is coming from. Photo courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art/Film Still Archive.

the same time, the film is spinning you into a complicated and subtle relationship with that "knowable" thing, which is informed by specific political, social, and cultural conceits. This relationship to "what you know" is not innocent: it is caught up in a web of ideology, i.e., relationships, attitudes, received ideas about the thing represented. These ideas are always about the "other" and never about ourselves. Who we are ourselves remains unexamined and perfectly intact, uncomplicated and whole.

Here's a familiar example from the early history of documentary cinema. Everyone has seen *Nanook of the North*, made in 1922 by Robert Flaherty. *Nanook* is one of the major models for the documentary film, and it provides a perfect ideological example.

*Nanook* is a film about a real man, a man who can build his igloo home in a howling blizzard and feed his family when there is no food. Meeting Nanook in Flaherty's film, we are supposed to feel awe, and a little inferior, and we do. But what are we to do with our inferior feelings, we who have to go to the supermarket to find food? Do we make films that make audiences feel bad about themselves, that point to their incapacities, their weaknesses, their blindness? We do not.

Flaherty is clever. He makes it possible for us

to shake off our inferior feelings. How? Flaherty shows us that Nanook does not understand the record player. When the white man who owns the trading post shows a record player to Nanook, Nanook puts the plastic disk in his mouth and bites, to find out what it is and where the music is coming from. This scene impresses on us that Nanook is "uncivilized," technologically backward and undeveloped. How can we admire (and enjoy) Nanook now—we who are civilized? Flaherty dissolves the contradiction: we can love him as our primitive ancestor or forefather. Flaherty's film presents Nanook as a perfect early version of ourselves, particularly in his role as the father of a nuclear family. We watch Nanook make toys for his children, smile at his wife, entertain his family, and solve problems in ways that perfectly duplicate the ways our fathers do these things. Thus a perfect, prototypical nuclear family is unearthed in the wilds of the Arctic, allowing us to claim Nanook, frozen in time, as an early version of ourselves. Wild Nanook is tamed and joins "the family of man." We, ourselves, are left intact.

Here is the ideology, restated and advanced to proto-political proportions. Nanook is a likable, handsome, and very masculine devil, awesome in his ability to survive and to main-

tain his family in the arctic north. (We can do none of these things: even if our life depended on it, we could not kill the walrus.) But we who can film Nanook and make hundreds of copies of that film and send them to every corner of the globe so that millions of others can watch the film and meet Nanook—we can help Nanook by teaching him things and giving him things to make his life easier, and maybe someday by buying him a refrigerator to keep his walrus meat fresh. And we have and we will.

This is the ideological underpinning of imperialism, and its younger sister, colonialism, and its baby sister, underdevelopment. And this, in large part, is the history of the documentary film, from *Nanook* to *Hoop Dreams*. A dishonest relationship has been created in the cinema through a false transaction between Robert Flaherty and ourselves. The "Eskimo" represented was not named Nanook: his name was Allakariallak. Eskimos are not monogamous: they usually have more than one wife, as did Nanook. Eskimos are not even Eskimos: they call themselves Inuit. In 1922, they were not living in igloos: they were living in wood houses, in villages, and they owned radios that they used to follow fur prices in San Francisco and London. That's how they figured out how much to ask for their pelts. The Inuit are not a charming ancient prototypical version of us. How could they be? They are still here.

The Inuits' current presence, their "here to-day-ness," and all the dilemmas that this presence presents to our society, which desires to exploit them, to turn them into suppliers of beaver pelts for top hats and fox pelts for coat collars, to put oil pipelines through their hunting grounds and destroy their sacred spaces, that presence is erased by the film.

Robert Flaherty loved and admired "Nanook" and the Inuit way of life. Personally, I think he wished he could be like Nanook—that he knew how to survive in the Arctic with just ten dogs, a sled, a knife, and a wife. Flaherty feared that the Inuit way of life would disappear because of the encroachment of the white man. (Of course, Flaherty himself was part of that encroachment. He was working for



*Nanook of the North:* Nanook warms his son's hands. Photo courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art/Film Still Archive.

Revillon Frères, a French fur trading company that sought the skins of arctic animals for its hat trade.) So Flaherty made a film about the wonderful Inuit way of life in the form of a paean to the Inuit male (with no mention of all the ways the white man was encroaching on that way of life), and it is very entertaining.

*Nanook* has its documentary pedigree of truth. Its very nature as a documentary, its stance toward its own material, says, "When you've seen this, and you *should* see it, you'll have understood something you need to know" (and I would argue most documentaries also say, discreetly, "and you'll like yourselves better for it because you'll be bigger for it—as in enlightened"). But *Nanook of the North* is a dumbed-down mask of the world. It is dumbed down in a particular, ideological way—to serve our sense of ourselves. Who *actually* benefits from this film, from its experience? Nanook? The Inuit? Flaherty? Us?

How to avoid making *Nanook of the North* every time we pick up the camera—that is the question for me. And that question splinters into parallel questions. What other forms can the nonfiction film take? Must it forever be dependent on "reality footage" for its pedigree? What else can it do besides making ideological claims about the world while producing an

imaginary audience of compassionate first-class, First World citizens?

When you work with documentary images, unless you purposefully contradict them within the text of your film, the claim will always be made that these images, taken from life, accurately represent the real world. This is a purely cultural conceit, but it has endured since the beginning of photography in the 1830s, and certainly since Lumière filmed workers leaving his father's factory in 1895 (a scene we now know was staged because five other takes of it have been found). Since I believe documentary images cannot claim to objectively represent the world and shouldn't be utilized as if they can, and because I believe these images, in context, can be as saturated with false consciousness as the fictional image, I stopped making classical documentary films around 1980.

I've found ways to go on making nonfiction films—films that struggled, in ways that interested me, with some of the problems I've been outlining. (Let's call them the "Nanook problems.") I've invented and borrowed strategies from other genres, mostly from the avant-garde. My recent films are all very different from each other, but when I think about it, they all share one property: there are always at least two intertwining subject tracks in the film. Put simply, the two tracks are 1) the subject, and what can be shown and said about it, and 2) the audience of the film—they who want to gaze in rapt attention at that subject. (Why do they gaze? With what intentions? And how have they been taught to do so?)

What films can we find that accomplish this? Let me propose an early example of a two-track film, Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread*, a film, I propose, that is worth much study before you lift a camera to your shoulder again.

Buñuel was an anarchist and a surrealist. In 1932 he made a blunt, brutal (to its audience) film about some of the poorest people in the world, the Hurdanos of Spain. Buñuel's film borrowed from two existing genres and mixed them up in a particular way: first, from the trav-

elogue he borrowed our middle-class desire to travel the world for adventure and pleasure, in search of quaint folkloric and art-historical details of architecture, customs, etc. From the ethnographic film he borrowed the requisite pseudo-scientific evidence of the conditions and calamities that other people suffer. Buñuel's film mixes up actual "documentary" footage with sequences that have clearly been staged, the most notable being a mountain goat "accidentally" falling off a mountain. (The audience senses that the fall could not have been accidental because it is expertly covered from four angles. Whether Buñuel had the goat shot or merely pushed from the mountaintop is not known.)

In *Land Without Bread* then, two tracks are produced. There is the seductive and by now very comfortable, un-self-conscious track of "the poor, primitive people of far away places" we might be interested to know about. But there is also the second, self-conscious audience track, which is produced by the treatment and the organization of the footage (by the paradoxical mix of familiar film genres; by the use of an inappropriately heroic Brahms symphony for score; by Buñuel's laconic and unsettling narration; by his specific, odd, and intrusive framing of shots; and by his disturbing use of time). This second track speaks about us: our bourgeois class assumptions; our comfort with staring at others—particularly poor people—in the cinema; our desire for rational explanations of the world; our desire to stare at monstrous deformities so we can be assured of our own wholeness; our willingness to let others—the state, the church, the university—fail to solve problems of devastating social injustice; our desire to let weeping in our cinema seats feel like and stand in for social action.

Another way to speak about the second track is to say that Buñuel *self-consciously* utilizes photographic images from the archive of "the real." That is, he makes impossible any confusion of his documentary representation with "the real thing"; instead, he makes the audience self-conscious about its desire to take in such "real" documentary images and about the

necessary textual framing that allows it to feel comfortable doing so. To borrow an idea from Vivian Sobchack, the second track helps to reverse the old order of subject/object. "That is, both in and across shots, the viewer is confronted not merely by contradictory cinematic and semantic elements which, in their juxtaposition, become so surreal that the very notion of contradiction 'falls away,' but also—and perhaps more significantly—by a form of contradiction which demands another and more socially aware form of resolution. Both in and across shots, sequences and the film in its entirety, the viewer is presented simultaneously with *thesis* and *antithesis* which can only find their resolution as a *synthesis* achieved in the *active process* of viewing the film" (Sobchack 71–72). Instead of focusing on the thing portrayed, the focus of the film becomes the unhappy position of the cinema spectator—self-conscious of the medium, self-conscious of the desire to stare, self-conscious of his/her perplexed pleasure in humiliating images of the other, self-conscious of his/her class position vis-à-vis those portrayed.

The two-track mix also makes impossible the classic, unspoken documentary contract between filmmaker and audience: "Now that you have seen and cared and been horrified, now that you have wept, you are no longer part of the problem—you are part of the solution, so you can feel good about yourself."

I want to propose that the documentary filmmaker should always, somehow, as Buñuel did, be setting into operation a second track of meaning, a track about ourselves, so that we, watching the film, don't melt into pure disembodied spectators, spectators who seem to have no designs of our own upon the world, no personal interests, no class interests, no national interests.

My own strategy for making the second track—and it means something different in every case—is to reframe the footage somehow. To reframe the footage means to renegotiate it, and in the renegotiating, to raise all possible questions about representation. Here are three brief suggestions for creating a second track:

1. Write a "truthful" fictional story about the footage and tell it, somehow, over or with the footage. In the story, tell what can't be told by historical witnesses (social actors) or by documentary footage. Use the story to interrogate the footage and its "received meanings."
2. Reframe the viewing activity by putting it inside another context, a context that steps the viewer back far enough to be able to see how the activity of viewing footage is performed; that is, a second context that interrogates the performance of the first, the reality footage.
3. Don't shoot documentary footage at all. Or maybe shoot it, but then use that footage only as "research." Construct a new film without it, one that speaks of what you have understood from the shooting, one that has your own intelligence in it. In this way, you could make a film that constructs a relationship between the audience and your knowledge, instead of a false relationship between the audience and the people in the film. This new relationship would be based on a contract that goes something like this: "I, the filmmaker, will propose some ideas. You can listen and watch and see what you think."

Here then is the second part of my *Documentary Film Dogma, 2001*: four things I always want from the documentary film, ideally.

1. *Production of a fully self-conscious audience.* Documentary films should seek to produce an audience aware of itself as a player in the world, a player with symbolic and material designs on that world.
2. *Transformative experience.* I want not just information, or intimacy, or pathos, but a cinema experience strong enough to change consciousness, that is, to make it impossible to think in old ways, so that I am no longer who I was before I saw the film.
3. *Aesthetically satisfying (maybe exhilarating) original form.* Aestheticians say art is the education of the senses. Buddhists

consider the mind the sixth sense. For the mind to be exhilarated, it has to go somewhere it's never been before.

4. *Fulfillment of Bertolt Brecht's prescription.* All political art should make manifest the distance between the way things are and the way they should be. Documentary films, like all cinematic forms, inherently claim the status of art because, like all art objects, they are aesthetic objects of meditation only and are otherwise entirely and extraordinarily useless. I think it's fair to say, likewise, that all documentaries are by their very nature political, in that they describe the real world in a particular way.

These ideals probably won't help you produce a "feature documentary" that can hold its own for six weeks on the art house circuit. They definitely won't help you make a film you can sell to the History Channel. But *Land Without Bread*, made in 1932, is still playing around. It's a tall order, but worth shooting for.

## REFERENCES

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