

Talking Film with Fredric Jameson

A Conversation with Michael Chanan

I

MC In 'The Existence of Italy' you say you felt some discomfort with the hegemonic position once occupied by the journal 'Screen'. What was the nature of this discomfort?

FJ Screen accomplished a lot, certainly they were a conduit for all kinds of French theory as related to film, and no one would want to downplay their historical role. I found, as with the Althusserians in France itself, that there was a tone of implacable ideological critique, what the Althusserians called specification, which meant assigning people their ideological boxes - which is probably very pleasant if one is on the inside, but not so pleasant if one is on the outside. I would put it this way: they devised a method of ideological analysis of film which was essentially formalistic. We all felt there had been a vulgar content-oriented form of ideological analysis that was traditional on the left, which had to do with what Terry Eagleton would call simply one's general ideology; and while we felt that his distinction between general ideology and aesthetic ideology was a very useful one, the film positions ultimately became codified in the purely formal terms of the latter, so that representation or realism was always ideologically bad and suspect, a form of bourgeois aesthetic ideology - something one could argue about, and which led to very interesting analyses. But all of these forms of newer ideological analysis, the very welcome emphasis on form and *its* ideologies, still left unbridged this connection between general ideology and aesthetic ideology, because there *is* such a thing as general ideology, it plays its role. We all wanted to feel that fascists like Celine and so forth were not simply to be condemned for their fascism, but something was to be done with the form. On the other hand, when it becomes abstracted in purely formal terms we lose all that, and therefore we lose any sense of history except the modernist story - namely, that we used to have representation, then we became self-conscious of this, we broke with it, and now only those works which foreground the problem of representation and its ideology are to be admitted. This is obviously a very oversimplified caricature, but I would say that's my general area of discomfort and it doesn't only apply to Screen, it applies to a whole range of forms of ideological analysis that were developed in the sixties and seventies.

MC I would broadly agree, but I also felt a dissatisfaction with Screen for a quite specific reason - the fact that their position, in being very reductive about the idea of film as text, seemed to distil away any sense that film was a construction in time. Because I always felt one of the most important things about film on that

level was its commonality with music as a form of structuring time, for me this was symptomatic, although not in the French themselves, of a total marginalisation of music. Was that something which ever drew your attention, in one form or another?

FJ Yes, I think that's part of it. Let me sharpen my discomfort a little more, because I think it meant there was an ideological grab-bag of everything labelled as representational which was generally assimilated to something called realism, and which very precisely had to do with time. In film, for example, it seems to me that what was stigmatised as bad and ideological - which it may have been, I'm not arguing that right now - was continuous editing and the effacement of breaks in the filmic text, in such a way that this temporal continuity was understood as a naturalisation of a production process which was wholly different from that. What that tended to mean finally was that the break became valorised, as over against any other form of temporal continuity, and that all other forms of temporal continuity that might actually have been present, except maybe in the long take, were then to be consigned to the area of bourgeois representation. But I think this is something that really all of structuralism in its larger sense suffered from: that is, once you put the emphasis on the synchronic, it's a very interesting moment when - as in Lacan for example - you try to make your way back to something diachronic, something you naturally want to see in a new way, but the connections are hard to make. So the only category that remains is somehow the break, and I think this approach can deal very well with breaks from one kind of synchronicity to another, but then what goes on inside of those, it really can't deal with. So I would imagine you could have a very interesting Screen-type discussion of Mahler, in the way you move from one kind of musical language to another in which the second one counts as a break with the first one, or subverts it or whatever, but what's actually going on in the overall form then becomes harder to deal with. And I guess in general what this means for the novel, for example, is really a rather old modernist idea that the modern novel, whatever that includes, is to take a poetic form in which it is the sentence that counts, and which essentially serves to subvert the older forms of story-telling that were going on in the nineteenth century. That has some serious consequences for the novel because it ends up encouraging people to produce modernist novels which are completely non-narrative, and while there are some of those that I like, I think it's a loss not to have the others. Postmodernism has presented a problem, because it represented a return to older forms of story-telling; and I suppose in music the newer people that return to melody and dismiss the twelve tone system and so on - they count as a kind of regression, and indeed unfortunately in many cases it *is* a regression, to what were really middle-class musical values.

MC I had another problem with 'Screen', which was about its effects on a generation of emerging film-makers who thought that they should be theoretically aligned with it, and the buzz word was deconstruction. And this had, I think, two results. One was, I'm thinking of students in film-making I had in the second half of

the seventies, who would quite frequently turn up with treatments for films which looked wonderful on paper but they didn't have the first idea about how to actually make them, and the second was those films which sometimes did get made and which proved virtually unwatchable, like an adaptation of a novel by de Sade where everything went on off-screen, out of frame, and it turned out to be a candidate for the most boring film ever made.

FJ I think the word deconstruction became another synonym for the formal subversion and undermining of these things; any of those words can serve as well. But then I come to another feature, which has to do with consumption and pleasure. Pleasure got re-appropriated by feminism in interesting ways; but the idea that narrative was a commodity that you consume and from which you derive the pleasures of consumption also stigmatised a great many things. So naturally if you want to subvert pleasure then non-pleasure or boredom is either one of your aims or one of your side-effects. There are other ways of handling the problem. I remember my old friend and comrade Stanley Aronowitz writing about the ideology of rapid editing, especially in American T.V - I heard de Certeau say this once, too - that the great thing about American television that the Europeans could never really match and the great success of mass culture was the whole notion of rapid changes, so that the limited attention span would be seized by something new. And so Aronowitz observed that if you want to undermine this, then clearly somebody like Ozu is the answer, because then you have the slowness of the thing counteracting your habits. But I think that may not have been the solution either, and certainly in experimental video there's a lot of what you're describing. But there are other 'solutions' - for me Straub and Huillet are examples of something that I still like to struggle with, but which is menaced by that exercise of dictatorial power where you force people to look at something much longer than they really want to. It reminds me of the history of photography, where in the old days you had to clamp the subject's head, because the exposure had to be so long by modern standards that the head had to stay in place for I don't know how many minutes - well, that's sort of the thing that some of this is doing to its spectators, and it certainly de-familiarises something, but I'm not sure if that's really what the vocation of film is.

Now when representation gets to be a grab-bag, it's generally labelled realism as a kind of negative term, and by that is meant any form of seemingly conventional narrative. There are two things to say about this. One is that all realism has also, when it was new, operated as a de-familiarisation, because it takes habits and does something new to them under the guise of showing what reality really is as opposed to what you thought it was, or what your habits told you, and your conventions told you it was. What that means, unfortunately for our critical languages, is that all really powerful forms of realism have always been modernisms. But it also means that Harry Levin's idea - and Levin is now thought to be the most conventional of the theorists of the nineteenth-

century novel - in *The Gates of Horn* and elsewhere, is really not so far from the 'Screen' position, because his idea is that realism always follows the model of the *Quixote* and takes pre-existing narrative paradigms and does something to them, that is to say precisely undermines them. For me that shows that the notion of subversion or undermining has some very real limitations and ought to be replaced by something both more political and more historical, because I think it corresponds in politics to a certain kind of anarchism, or Dadaism, if you like. And while those explosives are often very effective, in certain very precise historical situations, maybe there are other forms of politics, and of the politics of form, that we ought to be exploring, or re-discovering.

M C That throws up several things which I think we should pick apart a bit. One is the question of deconstruction because of its association with the idea of trying to develop a Brechtian cinema. The second is something I noticed in my own film-making practice, which is the way my own study of very early cinema completely changed my sense of pace. These things are usually overdetermined, and there's a film I made in El Salvador which is built around an interview with someone who spoke very slowly, so because there was a need to create a rhythm which respected that, the film slowed right down. But I was delighted to be able to do that because I felt quite strongly that the average solidarity film, or the average political reportage from a guerrilla war or suchlike, never actually gives you a chance to see, because it moves too fast. In this case the pay-back was that one or two Latin-Americans, when they saw the film, said they were astonished that an Englishman had captured the rhythm of peasant life in El Salvador so well. That gave some pause for thought. I associate this with a reminiscence of Jean Renoir pointing out that the camera can do two things. It can draw your attention to something, or it can sit back and let things draw attention to themselves. And the kind of narrative construction that we associate with Hollywood, what Noel Birch has called the institutionalised mode of representation, is almost entirely dependent on doing the one and not the other...

FJ That is, letting the camera sit back...

M C That's right. It never does. There may be occasional shots in John Ford, which are maybe a consequence of the fact that Ford almost never moves his camera, so sometimes you get a very wide shot of somewhere, and it takes you a moment or two to realise that something is approaching from the distance. But this is pretty rare, because for the most part this kind of desire to control the viewer is expressed in this tight framing - as in Hitchcock, for example - which is another form of control, just as important as the rapidity of cutting. So there may also be other ways of countering that, other than slowing down to the point of boredom, no?

FJ I want to mention something else which you've touched on in passing, and I know it's something that interests you - namely, sound. It seems to me that there's also a relationship with sound that has some

relationship with all of this. And that suggests to me yet another thing, which has to do with internal distance – that is to say that the problem with the shot that is simply held to the point of boredom is that there is not another element which is present to stand in tension with that first sensory condition. The reason I hesitate about the Straubs is that I think they always had a sense of sound as a kind of counterpoint to what they were doing with the camera.

MC Indeed not just something that acts as a counterpoint to the camera but something that fights with it.

FJ That fights with it? Oh yes, even better. And this is really the original question about deconstruction, that it's always in a sense a commentary on a text, but the commentary is supposed just to let the text show its own incoherences, and yet it's also another text in which the text is embedded. So you have that tension between the two texts, or between the filmic texts and the sound and so forth, and that's where the critical emerges. Once those internal distances are lost or diminished, all you have in front of you is the image itself, and it can't really say anything about itself, it can only direct your attention back to your own feelings of frustration about this image. Ideally something else should be there which is commenting on that image. And a break of course does that too, but I think that's only one of the ways that that internal tension or distance or whatever one wants to call it can be realised.

MC Let me bring this back to the potentially subversive nature of realism (and the possibility of escaping from that realism), because what you say about this helps to explain why film has recreated realism several times and sometimes to extremely radical effect. The obvious moment is of course the moment of neo-realism, and its influence beyond the shores of Italy. So you get Latin Americans who go to Italy to learn film making at the beginning of the fifties, they go back, and they apply neo-realism, first of all because it's the only practical way of making independent films in Latin-America at that point, but also because they believe that it can be used to show something that has never been seen on the screen before, and that itself is a revelatory act. Ten years on it's not enough, so something further has to develop, and that is precisely the sixties and the appearance of so-called "Nuevo Cine Latino Americano", which raises another series of questions and problems at another level, but we'll leave that aside for the moment. Now it seems to me that it is a necessary part of that process that indeed realism goes through a cycle of recuperation as well. One of the first effects of neo-realism in North American cinema was to reinstate what had of course been standard practice before the coming of sound, which was to go out and shoot on location, although only for certain moments when you want to remind the viewer that what you're watching is supposed to be located in an actually existing space. But my question is really this: can cinema escape from that realism, except in certain marginal, experimental practices, and can it escape from this cycle of recuperation?

FJ Well, there are obviously several points. I'm not necessarily endorsing the definition of realism that I mentioned, since I think it raises problems of its own. But the first thing one wants to say is that among those things which can be one pole of an internal tension is the outside world itself. That is to say, one can subscribe to Derrida's idea that there is no 'hors-texte', that everything is a text, but nonetheless feel the outside world as a different text from the camera. The relationship of the camera to these as yet unseen, unphotographed things – the things you don't look at, or you're not allowed to look at, or supposed to look at – this can also, at certain moments, historical moments, the ones you mention, become a source of this internal tension. Now unfortunately – and this would eventually bring us to Brechtian film as well - unfortunately what seems to be at stake here is simple familiarity: if you're betting everything on novelty, and on the shock of the new – and if even realism is doing that, by showing these things that haven't been seen – once we've seen it, and we've seen it enough, and over and over again, well then it isn't new any more and the shock isn't there, and I don't know how to overcome that problem, except by more history. That is to say, I think if you study the history of film you can hope little by little to put yourself back in a position where you recapture something of this initial shock, and the same is of course true of the history of literature, but that's very hard to do. This is also a form of reification and it's just inevitable in the process of time. But there are always new things to do, so I suppose one doesn't really have to recover those things except in a historical perspective.

MC If you narrow that down for a second, quite specifically to the trajectory of Hollywood, and ask questions about the representation of things which were at one point forbidden, or so completely stylised in their form of representation, you might arrive at what is not a very novel thesis about the role of the portrayal of sex and violence – the fact that it isn't novel doesn't necessarily mean that it isn't right in this case.

FJ There's been a dialectic of the lifting of taboos, and now we're running out of taboos and it seems to be almost at its end. That has something to do with transgression and there the internal tension is that somehow the taboo still has to be in place for the transgression to have any interest. When it's lifted everything is permitted and all tension and shock disappear.

MC But there are several taboos in present day Hollywood production, and the biggest of all is the taboo on the politics of everyday life.

FJ As well as the dominance of certain kinds of narrative which naturalise this everyday life. So in those cases perhaps there is a way in which some non-narrative forms could destroy that taboo, and there's a way in which some new narrative forms could also destroy it. But this is a society that's increasingly filled with narratives and images; and therefore as sophisticated as we may be with the conventional ones from the old days, we have

many more clichés and visual or narrative commonplaces surrounding us and filling up our lives that make it ever more difficult to really show everyday life in some novel form. They're increasingly being mediated by new categories, so when you establish for example a sociological or legal or social service category called the homeless, then all of a sudden you've taken something out of everyday life that we didn't want to see before, that we didn't see, that we couldn't see, and that was shocking, and the new word domesticates it and naturalises it. So then of course the film-makers who go out and show the homeless are already somehow themselves caught up by this stereotype that the very category lends everyday life, and I think that's something that is not going to go away.

II

MC This is an appropriate point to make a bridge to questions about documentary, because there is of course a certain very crucial strand within documentary, especially in America – the observational mode of Wiseman and others – which is precisely about going out and observing the politics of everyday life, in a manner which is not wholly pre-constructed by narrative, or at least the object is to go out and find a narrative, not to impose the narrative, and certainly not to direct the viewer's attention either by preconceived notions of what that narrative should be like or by the semantic domination of a narration. But then Wiseman gets accused of subjectivity, as if his subjectivity as an author and the supposed objectivity of the camera are in opposition to each other. Now, it's never seemed to me that objectivity and subjectivity in documentary are in opposition to each other in that way.

FJ It occurs to me that this problem is of a piece with what's going on philosophically, that is the nominalism of present day theory, the hatred of universals, the feeling that all universals involve norms, and that therefore the opposite of that is absolute particularity or specificity, that is, what Deleuze calls a singularity – something that cannot be classified, some unique, unclassifiable, very non-universalisable thing. The truth of that is the increasing organisation of the society under all of these categories, which I would rather call categories of classification, or universals of classification, rather than means of power or control – of course they're that, but on the level of universals and particulars it seems to me it's more a question of the organisation of knowledge, finding ever new slots for everything and everything having its place. And that would be, I think, a hard thing to escape even in documentary; if you decided, for example, that the stereotypes of the homeless are wrong, you want to show some newer kinds of realities that these people live in, but you're still caught in the category of "the homeless", and you can't get out of that no matter how specific and particular the images are. So I think it's a more general cultural problem – and I don't think the operation of the particulars is terribly effective in subverting those categories, the categories are really everywhere.

MC Certainly the kind of documentary that I've raised and you responded to, is almost inevitably a discourse which can only speak of the universal through the particular, and will sometimes come unstuck for that reason. I think for example of a current affairs reportage in England a few years ago about single mothers, which was roundly criticised in the press because it chose to follow a case widely regarded as untypical, and it clearly didn't serve them well whatever the point they were trying to make. So that's part of the game, that the universal can only be represented through the particular, and also contrariwise, the particular is read as a universal. But that doesn't seem to me to be necessarily a problem on the political level if the film-maker has a certain, fairly clear political project. Let's go back to the homeless, because I had a pair of students a few years ago who got a commission to make a short film for a charity to be used as a trigger for discussion, and what the charity wanted was to destroy certain stereotypes of the homeless. So quite clearly they were working within a given classification but also had a particular political task to fulfil. So they went looking for homeless people who could produce stories of how they became homeless which countered the stereotypes, and found an amnesiac: someone who got off the train one morning and he'd forgotten who he was, and because he wasn't your typical lumpen but an educated man, his account of finding himself homeless and being in a hostel and so forth, did indeed help to break some stereotypes.

FJ Well let me put it on a higher narrative level, then, which comes back to what you said about objectivity and subjectivity. Supposing that the documentaries we're talking about - they ostensibly are exploring pieces of reality and de-familiarising them and so on - but supposing there's a second narrative level in which what we're not seeing but what is present all the time and what the film is really about, is the drama of the documentary film-maker - that is, an actor who has a certain mission. So the whole film can be seen as a kind of dramatic act in this larger, unfiled story, which is this film-maker doing something to these clichés or conventions. And then of course there's another actor who is often not seen, and these are the people who make the categories up, who are being attacked. So we have a second level of narrative, in which the documentary film is an object in that narrative rather than being an aesthetic object in its own right. And then these questions of what one chooses to do politically within a situation like that get to be part of that larger narrative.

MC I think that's absolutely right, and may help to explain why documentary discovered reflexivity in the first place. It certainly corresponds to my own experience, especially to the moment when you find yourself enclosed within some other power structure. I felt this very strongly filming on human rights in Cuba, but it sometimes came across most forcefully in a negative form - because of the shadowy presence of the CIA in some of the stories we were following, or else because sometimes, when we were filming on the streets and people realised who we were, they would clam up - in those days some Cubans felt that there were

certain things you didn't say to foreigners.

But what you say also relates to the question of viewer expectations, doesn't it, which are precisely enclosed within a set of categories that exists nowhere in the world but on the television screen. You can start with Raymond Williams' notion of flow, but then you have to explain something within that flow about how sets of images get categorised. And the question would be, what is it that when you zap from one channel to another, tells you, almost before you've registered the content of the image, what kind of image it is.

FJ But then we're back to generic categories. You turn those channels on and you see, oh well, this is a documentary, or this is live camera coverage from Florida, or whatever. But these are genres, and there's a whole interplay between them.

And then what must also gnaw away at the freshness or the immediacy of documentary is the generic category of documentary itself. So the film-maker is confined within a certain set of narrative conventions, but the genre of the documentary, it seems to me, also has to have its effects, which I would think are generally bad, they mediate between the object itself and the viewer.

One way of looking at it is that modernism was an attempt to get rid of generic categories, but that genre continues to exist in the subcultures, or in mass culture, and it certainly exists on television. People know what genres they want to see; if they want a documentary they switch to Discovery Channel, for example, and this immediately cuts off some expectations, and organises and manages others.

MC Nevertheless, I tend to think that the question of genre in documentary is on the one hand apparently obvious, and on the other hand extremely elusive. It leads me to want to ask why you think it is that film studies have almost completely ignored documentary until fairly recently, what is it about documentary that gives it a generic status that seems to defy analysis by the same kinds of sets of criteria that arise naturally in fiction?

FJ Well, I think you could look at it in two ways. Maybe the ambition of documentary is also to break altogether with genre, like these modernist works I've been talking about, maybe it wants to be somehow radically non-generic. But given the force of things, genre always expands to re-contain all of that. What they can't handle is probably the absence of narrative. Is that fair to say? Is genre absolutely connected to narrative? I keep coming back to the question of narrative, though, because it seems to me it's central in all the things we've been talking about. And even if there wasn't a narrative in documentary, you would project one onto it and unconsciously develop one, and that's probably what resists the aesthetics of film study; because I think the film categories

want to be various forms of narrative and various uses of narrative, or even subversions of narrative, but there documentary doesn't seem to fit in very well.

MC Let's try to specify a little bit more what narrative consists in. I would want to maintain in the case of documentary that there are narrative documentaries and there are documentaries which are not narrative because they are premised on let's say a poetic mode. [FJ: Yes.] I would also want to distinguish between narrative documentaries and documentaries constructed by means of some form of argument. [FJ: Right.] And that's different from what the French used to call the "film d'essai" – I'm thinking of the films of Franju in the early fifties for example. Brian Winston I think quite usefully points out that you can structure films like that on the basis of what is so simple and straightforward a narrative that it's nothing more than a set of pegs to hang something non-narrative on – the classic narrative documentaries are "a day in the life of", or something of that kind. [FJ: Right.] What that tends to is the notion that there are a whole lot of different sub-genres within documentary, and I'm not sure how happy I am with the notion of sub-genres in this context, because I don't know what documentary as a genre would then consist in. So that for me is part of the problem. How, then, would you specify what narrative consists in, in relation to this? Maybe one way of attacking that is also to ask if it's possible to have a fiction film which is non-narrative?

FJ That's a big question. You know the famous Godard remark about beginnings, middles and ends but not necessarily in that order. There has to be some kind of narrative loop, or pay-off of some sort, which need not of course come at the end, and that has to do with narrative pleasure, and with narrative closure, in some sense, although closure can certainly be derived from leaving everything hanging, that can also be a form of closure. So I guess I want to say that maybe in documentary, the problem of narrative would be that of closure: when does the documentary wrap everything up, when does it feel it's said everything, when has it reached its form of closure, what is its final twist: does documentary have an internal dynamic of that kind? Or is it perceived as being something that could potentially go on and on - not even a slice of life because that was the naturalist novel, and that had plenty of closure? The more beautiful and tight and organised the documentary becomes formally, with twist endings and so on and so forth, the less a documentary it is, one would think.

MC Yes, if it's like that. But it makes me want to say that ironically the documentaries which most conform to the idea that you've just suggested, of something which seems so much just a slice of life that any point at which you end it isn't an ending, it's just an arbitrary halt and life goes on, are precisely those films of Wiseman which have been accused of being subjective narrative constructions.

FJ Yes, of course, because "life goes on", and "a day in the life of", those are all very conventional narrative forms, or paradigms, so the minute you see them you identify them as artifice and art, and then disbelief sets

in. So I suppose that the aesthetics of documentary would have to be, above all, to avoid the feeling of artfulness, or of having been arranged by an aesthetic hand, so to speak, even though clearly nothing is so taxing and demanding, as you well know, as editing a documentary film. But probably it's your mode of concealment – Hollywood wants to conceal its transitions and its production process, but yours is to conceal the artfulness of the thing and the formal categories that are involved in making it.

MC Perhaps. I think, for me, a successful documentary is one which gives you the sense that you are taking the viewer into a space where... I almost want to evoke Richard Leacock's phrase about gathering data that can be used to figure out what the hell is going on. And another type, not un-associated with that, but which is probably more explicitly political, which is giving somebody a voice to speak.

FJ Right, but then I think you have to distinguish those two things, because data really suggests that meta-data has to be produced, and that's certainly an artificial effect: to give people what they want to take as broad data but which in fact has already been thoroughly processed, in order to appear to be broad data. Now, the other thing, the matter of the voice, I think that's something else, because we're talking about this in a very formal way, and yet the great thing about documentary - is the things that people say, not necessarily giving them the platform to say the things they want to say, but surprising them in saying a whole raft of things; that is to say, having some other presence within the film that is not that of the film-maker, but which is some other human being who by way of speech is affirming some absolute freedom - to use the Sartrean term - some unforeseeability that you could only capture that way, that a script-writer has to try to imitate in various narrative films, but probably doesn't want to imitate absolutely because you can give people in fiction films some unusual and unforeseeable things, but you do it for some kind of effect. In this case it is not only unplanned, but has some other centre of human power or creativity.

MC You appeal there to a Sartrean notion. I would appeal to Bakhtin and the idea of the double voice.

FJ Alright. It's a question of how the freedom of the other is somehow respected. I don't like this formula, but it conveys what I'm trying to get at. And I think Bakhtin meant that too: the dialogical meant that there really was another voice, and therefore another centre of freedom, or otherness, or whatever you want to call it.

MC I'm interested in why you don't like that way of describing it, because on one level, if you're talking about this as a political task in documentary, then that's exactly what it's about, and it's an ethical issue. That's to say, documentary is very much an ethical undertaking in the way that fiction filming is not. And then these things are connected, and that's why I like the Bakhtinian idea of double voicing. So much of the time the documentarist is attacked on the grounds that they are imposing an ideological framework on the people

within the film, as if those who attack in that way, who attack the documentaries for their subjectivity, are incapable of registering the kind of dialogical reality that Bahktin is talking about.

FJ But since you encourage me to say these nasty things about “Screen”, I do have to side with them on this. The reason I feel discomfort is humanism. It seems to me the “respect for the freedom of the other” is very much one of these humanist slogans that I would prefer to avoid. And I would also rather you said a political act than an ethical act, because for me the latter is also a humanistic category, and after all one may be respecting the freedom of the people talking in the film, but one also wishes very much to use that politically against some other people’s freedom. So I think there’s something conflictual here that one has also to “respect”, so to speak. I don’t mind the way we’re saying this, but I’m trying to see where this sense of radical otherness can come from and what kind of people it can come from; that is to say, is it possible to film just anybody and have this happen? We taught, a year or two ago, this long series called *An American Family* in the course of which the family broke up, and went in different directions, and so on and so forth, and there I suppose the sense of otherness was really again connected with time, temporality. The documentary was able to capture not just the changes in this family over I think a year or so, but also, and very importantly, the influence of the making of the documentary itself on all of that: so the camera became very much a character in what was happening in this family. I remember a wonderful film about the Portuguese Revolution, that did this too, *Torre Bela* (Thomas Harlan, 1977), in which little by little the process of making the documentary had its effect on what the peasants did with this estate. So the respect for the freedom of the camera as an other in this process, or even the film-maker and the film group, is also part of it. But somehow the feeling always is that if it’s fiction that somehow is not present, and it isn’t really dialogical, and that there is a single person or director somehow controlling all this process, so that even if what a fictional character says is astonishing and fresh, after all somebody did write it, and even if it’s improvised, it’s still controlled. I know that a lot of fiction film-makers have improvised a lot, but somehow there’s a matter of control there, which is of a different kind.

MC I think I see that partly in relation to, let’s say Schiller’s notion of schein: that it’s not illusion; it’s the illusion of illusion.

FJ Yes, I think for a lot of things that would be true. But that takes us back to the mystery of the construction of the documentary, and *its* illusions, so I guess one would be led to another frustrating position, which is that documentary is that form which tries to conceal the illusion of its being a documentary, of its being constructed, and so on and so forth; it has its own illusions.

MC Except that so much contemporary documentary doesn’t do that any more, because it tries to

incorporate a self-reflexive sense, which acknowledges that this is what is happening. I think something else is at issue, which is captured in a formula I like to use, which says that the documentary that you see is only one version of the documentary it could have been. Why? First, because the other versions are lying on the cutting room floor. Second, because the documentary that was shot is also only one version of what could have been shot. And not only that, but there was always whatever was going on behind the camera at the moment of filming, whichever way you point the camera. So you can only indicate these other putative versions by some kind of reflexivity, but you can never show them.

FJ There's a supplementary question that this reflexivity produces, and that's whether reflexivity in most of modernism - and we're sort of talking ourselves into making of documentary the supreme form of modernism, as opposed to all the fictional ones - [MC: *I like that...*] - is that reflexivity can always destroy illusion, and break through it. Is this so? Or is there a supplementary illusion involved, an illusion of the second power of reflexivity which re-contains it? It seems to me that would then be the problem that we're unfortunately creating for ourselves.

III

FJ We were talking about something which distinguishes the most wonderfully devised realistic dialogue in a novel, from this effective truth of the unforeseeableness of people's answers in a documentary. But is the interview documentary?

MC I think you could argue that it is, because although it's set up and controlled in some way, it's also unpredictable. In some respects it's like a game of chess, at other times it's like one of those games Wittgenstein talks about where a player can change the rules as they go along. I'm thinking of situations I've been in where, for example, the interviewee turns the tables and asks the interviewer questions. What's curious about this is that it turns the interview back into something like an ordinary conversation, so you also get situations where the interviewer, instead of asking a question, makes a statement, but it's taken as a question, which regularly happens in ordinary conversation. And these are precisely the moments when the interview comes most alive.

FJ Right, but what I was trying to get at was that in both these situations it is no longer the controller, the interviewer, or the documentary film-maker who is getting this out of somebody else, but rather a non-human, namely the camera, or the interview situation which is provoking a revelation of the other person that is not controlled somehow by the first human subject, so to speak.

MC Well, it's true there's a kind of unwritten contract whereby the interviewee accedes to the power of the camera, but I would want to take this by stages. I like the idea of talking about the situation here. Partly what appeals to me in this description is that what is going on in these moments when it comes alive is unrehearsed and cannot be repeated ...

FJ That's very important.

MC ... so it corresponds to the documentarist's dream that the only true documentary image is the one you get on the first take (because repeating it, even if you could, would make it look stilted). Now there are some notable exceptions. There's the story of Joris Ivens filming the Bay of Pigs invasion, and he's with the Cuban militia, and they're in a clearing and some of the invaders emerge from the jungle and get arrested, but the camera wasn't turning, so he asked them to do it again! It's a famous shot, the mercenaries emerging from the jungle, hands above their heads. From one point of view this just means that the successful documentarist has to have, in common parlance, a large dose of "chutzpah", no? And I don't know how to theorise that exactly, because, like Stravinsky said about rhythm, either you've got it or you haven't, right? But I accept that from another point of view it might mean that the instrument, the camera, does create a situation in which various elements come into play that are beyond the individual will. So for me, one of the most exciting things that can happen when you're shooting, even if you're filming in a completely conventional way, is when something happens in front of the camera which the camera has provoked but you couldn't anticipate, and you know it can't be repeated.

FJ Now, it strikes me that this notion of unrepeatability is somehow very important. It seems to me that's one of the crucial markers, and it brings us back to temporality; we're also then moving away from the fictional film towards photography, and its mysteries, which no one has really properly theorised. What is it about the photograph which is so completely different from photographic works of art like Cindy Sherman, and also from fiction? But now, the other feature is that somehow the camera is being more than a simple registering device in this process. If there's a reflexivity in documentary it's because the camera is somehow making this unrepeatability happen. Would you agree to this?

MC I'm slightly loath to say that it's the camera that's doing it. I wonder if this isn't the point to ask another question that I want to raise, about a Lacanian understanding of where film lies. Because the formulation that I've arrived at would go like this: I don't think that film belongs exactly to the Symbolic because I don't think that it's really a language ...

FJ This was the great thing they were struggling with, in the heroic days of film theory.

MC Yes. But it's more like music. It's not a language in the full sense; it has some kind of grammar, but in the case of film that grammar is even weaker than it is in the case of music, and we've seen that the grammar of music is not exactly stable. It's a puzzle because there is this curious state of affairs in music where you can switch between one grammar and another instantly, and recognise it instantly. But there's certainly no vocabulary, and nor is there in film, except that within the discourse of a particular style you can create the illusion of a vocabulary. I'm thinking of the way that Hitchcock, for example, will induce you to feel that a shot looking up the staircase always has a certain import, and therefore when he reverses it and looks down the staircase, it means something else.

So film can't be placed within the realm of the Symbolic, and intuitively one would suppose it belongs in the realm of the Imaginary. But I keep feeling that in documentary there's another level. I feel it most strongly when I'm watching historical archive footage, or when I recently saw a home movie of Freud which was shot by an American psychoanalyst in the 30s who was an amateur movie maker – where you're looking at these images and keeping your eyes peeled and saying to yourself, this ought to be telling me something but I don't know what it is. You're trying to interrogate the pictures for some information which you feel they must contain because this is the trace of the real thing, but the images don't give up their secret, and so in Lacanian terms I want to say that what I'm confronted with in this peculiar way is a re-presentation of the Real.

FJ Well look, I don't think I could produce a full, new Lacanian reading of film. He talks about these things once in a while but it's not very central. But I do think one can take a cue from the way in which he handles this triad of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real - the Real being, of course, the most elusive of all these terms, it slips around all over the place. But the whole thrust of Lacanianism in the early seminars is directed against the Imaginary, and the illusions of the Imaginary, which are unity, and the ego. So in that moment the Symbolic order played the role of destroying the illusions of the Imaginary, and the Symbolic is introduced in human development to lift the person who's locked into the illusions of the Imaginary, break the subject out of that into some other order which is not a personal order, although it does involve a big Other somewhere. Now, I'm tempted to say that this is the way one should still proceed, and in that case, all right then, fiction film is the realm of the Imaginary, it is the construction of the Imaginary, the ego of the viewer, and so on; all the mesmerisations and the illusions of the Imaginary are present in fiction film. Whereas documentary, when it works, is like photography again. Like your Freud home movies, you have this photograph of something that was once there, and is now not there, and that is irrevocable and unrepeatable, because it's in the past; and yet here's this thing and often it does not produce the effect of the Imaginary, and probably not the Symbolic either.

So despite the slipperiness of the term Real, it seems to me that documentary would be a situation in which it is somehow the resistances of the Real that are used to destroy the Imaginary captation or fascination, and that the Symbolic only plays a role in so far as the Real is used against certain persisting signifiers from the Symbolic, that is to say, universal ideas and clichés and so forth. But the crucial enemy has to be, I think, the use of vision in the promotion of this Imaginary fascination. So it would be my temptation to try a version of this. Because in Lacan it's never just the one or the other, the terms are always used in some relationship, normally of tension with each other, if not outright conflict, and I think you wouldn't really have a Lacanian theory unless you respected that conflict somehow.

MC I like that, because it suggests that the dialectic that goes through the history of documentary is a dialectic between the attempt to contain the documentary image within the Symbolic all the time, for example by means of the infamous "voice of God" commentary, and the attempt to escape from that, precisely not by going into the Imaginary because that's the realm of fiction, but by re-invoking the Real in some sense.

FJ And the Real in its quality as unrepeatable, I would say. That's the connection one would want to make. I'm persuaded by what you've said, that that's a very crucial constitutive element of this, that without that you don't really have documentary. But there too, the spillage of that problem over into the problem of photography, it seems to me, is another reason why film studies departments find this whole problem rather discomforting.

Recorded 5th December 2000, at Duke University.

[Final revised. 8,500 words]