

On Documentary: The Zapruder Quotient

Michael Chanan

Nothing shows so clearly the growth of scepticism in the twentieth century as our attitude towards documentary. The emergence of the documentary as a recognised cinematic genre in the 20s inherited a naïve trust in the veracity of the image as an authentic representation of the real. Today we no longer see things this way. Documentary has succumbed to a general disbelief in the possibility of objective truth, and the rise of the very inexact concept of relativism. My purpose here is not to defend this relativism, but to suggest that the problem is rather that objectivity is not what it was thought to be...

•

At the centre of the question of documentary lies the issue of the truth value of the image. The character of the problem is clearly posed in the example of the Zapruder footage, the 22 seconds of Super 8 film of the Kennedy assassination shot by an amateur cameraman which forms the principal visual material evidence of the event. For many years the footage was suppressed, only to be seen by researchers visiting the government archive where a copy was held; it had been purchased by Life magazine the day after the assassination and published only in the form of still images, minus the frame which shows Kennedy's head being blown apart. Although bootleg copies were circulating by the end of the 60s, it was seen publicly for the first time only in 1975, when a U.S. television journalist defied the risk of legal action to show it on network television. Nowadays available on CD-Rom, everyone can confirm for themselves what it shows: Kennedy thrown to the rear by a bullet which according to the Warren Commission, came from behind.

The Zapruder footage is in one description 'a home movie taken from the position a Hollywood movie crew would have set up' if they had been staging the event. [1] But it's shaky and poorly framed, the lens jiggles in response to Mr. Zapruder's reaction to hearing the shot and Kennedy's head momentarily drops out of the image. However, on close and repeated examination it becomes clear that it shows Kennedy being shot at least twice, and that the second bullet, which splits open his head, came from somewhere out in front of him. Researchers who saw it in the 60s realised immediately that it impugned the Warren Commission. (After it became a public, another television documentary added to it a sound recording of the event which had also survived; married up, the clip jumped alive with a synchronous soundtrack on which one heard and seemingly saw the report of three shots.) At New York University in the early 70s, the footage began to acquire the properties of an icon or a fetish. Among film makers like Mike Wadleigh and Martin Scorsese there was talk of the Zapruder quotient; according to Wadleigh, 'if you had a very high quotient of total amateurism in terms of technique, but the content was superb, what you were filming was absolutely riveting, that was 100% on the Zapruder curve.' [2]

As an emblem of the truth value of the documentary image, this interpretation of the Zapruder footage harks back to the values of direct cinema, the form of documentary observation first practised systematically in the years preceding the Kennedy assassination by film-makers in the United States associated with Robert Drew (including Pennebaker, Leacock and the Maysles Brothers); to be distinguished from, though often bracketed with, *cinéma vérité*, a movement born in France with a film made by a sociologist and an anthropologist who was also an ethnographic film-maker (*Chronique d'un été* by Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch). These films were the first to be made with the new portable cameras equipped with mobile synchronous sound which were also to revolutionise television reportage. The difference between direct and *vérité* is critical: the former believes that it is possible to get at the truth by reducing as far as possible the film-maker's intervention; the latter proposes that the truth will only emerge by foregrounding the film-maker's intervention.

The former position, of course, has now become philosophically unfashionable. However, the American documentarist Errol Morris, appearing in a British television programme about the Zapruder footage in 1993, becomes mischievously misleading when he says of this footage that because it cannot tell the absolute truth, the image is therefore a lie. I am relieved to discover, on meeting him at a film festival a couple of years later, that his thinking is much more subtle than this; the television documentary misrepresented him. In fact he agrees that the issue is more complicated, and the documentary image is evidentiary, it contains a veridical aspect which is filtered through the particular point of view of the observer filming it, and the skill and craft and artfulness with which the camera is operated - or not, as the case may be. It is one thing to recognise this dose of subjectivity in the image; it doesn't follow that it therefore is not a true image. For that would be to assume an equation in which the subjective is opposed to the objective, and the objective is identified with truth. But the two are not opposed in this way, they are both present at the same time. As the analysis of the Zapruder footage demonstrates.

•

The philosopher asks: 'When I see JFK being shot, do I see JFK? Do I see a representation of JFK? Do I see an accurate or inaccurate representation?'

The semiologist answers: What you're seeing is a sign which is both index and icon. An index insofar as it is the mechanical result of a photochemical process, an icon in being a (more or less transparent) representation. However, thus far there is no difference between fiction and non-fiction. The difference between these two lies in the nature of the profilmic event.

The term profilmic was introduced in the 50s by a group of French scholars led by Etienne Souriau, as one of a series of eight technical terms which they agreed on in their discussions, of which only two, however, have passed into general theoretical currency - profilmic and diegetic. [3] Diegetic indicates narrative content (as opposed to non-diegetic elements, such as background music). Profilmic was intended to refer to the selected elements of reality (the actor, the decor, etc.) that are placed in front of the camera and leave their impression on the film. The term was paired with the 'afilmic', indicating unselected reality, reality independent of any relation with film; and this is where Souriau included documentary: 'A documentary is defined as presenting people and things that exist in the afilmic reality'. [4]

Assuming that you're watching the Zapruder footage then the event portrayed is clearly not staged, and those appearing in it appear as themselves, they are not actors. This is not to say that documentarists never stage things, and never use actors, but if this is allowable under certain conditions, it is pertinent to note that nowadays the documentarist is often under obligation to indicate when doing so, to signal it to the viewer by a caption or some other means. In other words, the veridical quality of documentary rests partly on the afilmic nature of the represented event, and partly on the institutional framework within which the film is presented. Inevitably there is a measure of trust involved - there is a kind of contract with the viewer which says 'trust me, this is not something I have invented, I'll tell you when I'm doing that'. Or in more general terms, as Dai Vaughan recently put it, the fact that one is seeing it is taken as evidence that it must have existed in the first place. However, in the case of fiction, we take it that this 'existed in the first place' is only of the second order: it has been placed there in order for the camera to observe it and make what it will of it. Moreover, there is nothing in the fiction film other than the profilmic world. The documentary, however, is different. Precisely because we suppose it to represent the afilmic world, we do not suppose that what we see is self-sufficient, but rather something cut out of the selfsame world as the one we live in. And therefore the documentary involves ethical concerns about trust and the possibility of misrepresentation which are not raised by fiction. (That doesn't mean fiction doesn't raise its own ethical concerns, but they're different.) Watching a documentary, we may find ourselves convinced that what we see adds up; we are nevertheless aware that there is always something else which could be taken into account but isn't there.

•

Observe the logic of the distinction between the profilmic and afilmic: It implies that afilmic reality can become filmic material, and this is what documentary consists in. The question is, what happens to it when it does?

The answer of course is that it becomes imbued with a whole range of filmic qualities, above all with those which Souriau calls *écranique* - a word for which there is unfortunately no ready English equivalent. The screen is flat but interpreted as having depth; it is in constant movement; here 'the proportions, arrangement and contrasts of light and shade, the dynamic axes of movement and other screen properties...may acquire an expressive value distinct from their representational significance'. [5] Two other factors also enter the process: the process of selection is one which begins by isolating and fragmenting the afilmic reality (*découpage*), and ends by recombining these fragments according to diegetic and poetic requirements (*montage*).

To summarise: If the profilmic (including here the afilmic) refers to what is in front of the camera, and is in that sense is 'objective', then the filmic indicates what is behind - the domain of human agency which photographs, directs and edits the film, and cannot avoid making all sorts of subjective choices in the process. Filmic thus subsumes all the elements of style, whether conscious and controlled or unconscious and uncontrolled. In other words, style in the artistic sense, and other factors which influence and affect the film-maker's subjective choices, be they sociological or economic or ideological, or simply lack of skill, as in the case of the Zapruder

footage. For here the filmic is present in the amateurism - meaning lack of filmic control - in the way the camera is handled.

This means that objective and subjective should not be regarded as mutually exclusive categories - they are both present at the same time. Nor is it usually possible to separate them out. However there are certain circumstances in which this is done. I shall not speak here of the Rodney King footage, but an experience of my own, when many years ago I filmed a big anti-fascist demo in London. We had shots of people being arrested and showed the material to the defence committee. We ended up in court showing the film on behalf of one of the defendants. It was very ironic - the only place we could put the projector so that everyone in the courtroom could see the screen was by placing it in the witness box itself, while I had to stand beside the box and reach over to turn it on. The only requirement was that we showed the footage (16mm) unedited. The film was taken as unimpeachable testimony of the arrest of this particular defendant with which the evidence of the policeman who arrested him simply did not tally. The result was a happy one. The policeman in question went white as a sheet. The magistrate, when the projection came to an end, looked round the courtroom and then announced 'Case dismissed'. Here, of course, it was only the afilmic which counted, and not the filmic at all.

Some may consider the court's faith in the objectivity of the filmic evidence to be naïve, but I can tell you that everyone - except the police - was content to consider it so. On the other hand, even this depends on a disposition to believe, and there are certain limits to what would be considered admissible evidence in such circumstances...

•

One last observation - not to round off but to open out towards further questions: there is clearly a certain sense in which the image can be truthful but not exactly objective. I do not consider this a serious criticism of the documentary endeavour. I reply with the remark of Fernando Birri, that the documentary is a process of approximation towards reality, but a reality you can never fully grasp. This idea is beautifully expressed by a recent contribution to an e-mail discussion on the subject of cinematic truth. It is not necessary, says the writer, to abandon truth in favour of relativism, but merely to abandon it as a full presence. 'What we have to do is defer the arrival of truth, on the principle of Zeno's paradox. Representation -- or any other process of adequate description -- approaches its object in the same way Achilles approaches the tortoise, by infinitesimals. By the time we have described the real, it has moved on fractionally, and we must follow it across the diminishing gap, without ever seizing it. Film operates by Zeno's paradox, constantly approximating but never seizing a real which flees before it.' [6]

There is also a sense in which screen truth is not objective, but in the eye of the beholder. In other words, interpretive meaning, as opposed to manifest content, is not inherent in the screen but is generated in the space between the screen and viewer's eyes. This is the domain of what Souriau calls the spectatorial, including sociological and psychological factors which affect the viewer's disposition towards the film. But that's not all. The same viewer is liable to see the same film differently if the space of viewing is different. The cinema, for example, is a different kind of

space, constitutive of different types of attention, from television or video. But this is not just a matter of setting, and of course geographical location. The screen is a representational space, in Henri Lefebvre's sense of the term, in his crucial book *The Production of Space*. In Lefebvre, a representational space is an artistic or technical medium which forms a system of symbolic representations, and thus tends towards a more or less coherent system of non-verbal symbols and signs which maps certain elements and relations of the physical, the social and the mental worlds. The products of representational spaces are symbolic works, in this case, films, either fiction or documentary, or some admixture of the two. This is the problem. The screen world is a continuum. At opposite ends, fiction and documentary clearly constitute different representational spaces, which operate according to different conventions, make different kinds of claim on the viewer, and indeed address the viewer differently. But in the middle where they meet, here things are very different. Here, where fiction and documentary borrow each others techniques, the results can be very deceptive. They can also be very revealing, but that's another matter.

References

- 1 Late Show Special, dir.Tim Kirby, BBC2 22.11.93
- 2 Late Show Special, op.cit.
- 3 Etienne Souriau, *L'Univers Filmique*, Flammarion (Paris), 1953; see the Preface.
- 4 Souriau, op.cit., p.7.
- 5 Souriau, op.cit., p.8.
- 6 Sean Cubitt, posting to film-philosophy@mailbase.ac.uk, 20.4.98; quotation slightly edited.