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# The objectifying documentary: realism, aesthetics and temporality

## Abstract

This article deals with the representation of reality in documentary and describes a new category of documentary, namely, the objectifying documentary. The objectifying documentary originated in the 2000s, with examples such as *Bosnia. Lost Images* (2003), and questions a certain type of war propaganda. It pursues two goals: to deconstruct the conventions of the realist style and reveal the artifice behind its supposed immediacy and claim to provide "evidence" of what happened; and to tell a story from a rational, "objectified" point of view. It therefore takes on the appearance of an epistemological tool informed by scientific rationality. In this paper I first describe the characteristics of the realist style in documentary, which was hegemonic until the end of the twentieth century. I then develop the concept of the objectifying documentary and describe its visual and narrative strategies. My methodology is that of aesthetic analysis, as proposed by Corner (2003). I illustrate the concept of the objectifying documentary through the case study of a realist-style news report on the killing of Muhammad Al-Durrah in 2000, which has since been objectified by the documentary *Das Kind, der Tod und die Wahrheit* (2009). In the last section I analyse one of the most powerful visual strategies for constructing documentary objectivity, namely, the manipulation of temporality. In the conclusions I reflect on the presumed rationality and scientific nature of objectifying documentaries and their epistemic ideology.

## Keywords
**Objectifying documentary, objectivity, documentary realism, temporality of the image, image manipulation, Al-Durrah affair**

## 1. Introduction

Documentary images play an important role in our conception of reality. They can represent an absent reality, as described by Pliny in the fable of the Corinthian girl, or our greatest desires, as so beautifully illustrated by Ovid in the myth of Pygmalion. But if documentary images can mediate between our memory, our perception of reality and our desire, that is because, besides performing a mimetic function, they can

also shape the schemata through which we remember, perceive and desire. If documentary images satisfy our thirst for reality, it is because they also shape our way of looking at reality. This is one of the little acknowledged influences of the study of art history on the theory of the documentary image: according to the great art historian, Ernst Gombrich, if certain styles of representation can be understood as being mimetic (i.e., as bearing a resemblance to their referent), it is because their conventions mimic one or other of the ways we have of perceiving reality. In mimicking one of these possible modes of perception, these styles of representation acquire a profound gnoseological dimension, i.e., they function as languages that articulate our experience of the world.

In this article I enter the debate over the representation of reality in order to describe a new category of documentary: the objectifying documentary. The objectifying documentary uses the language of classical cinema, including image editing and omniscient narration, to deconstruct previous versions disseminated by realist documentaries and put forward positivist arguments for a new reading of events. They thus present themselves as an epistemological tool informed by scientific rationality.

To fully grasp the epistemological function of the objectifying documentary, in this article I first identify the characteristics of the realist documentary, which was hegemonic from the 1960s to the 1990s, although various alternative genres have emerged in recent decades. I then develop the concept of objectification in documentary cinema and describe the strategies used in objectifying documentaries. To illustrate these strategies, I analyse a case that shows how the same images are used in a realist documentary and an objectifying documentary. The case in question is the news report of the killing of Muhammad Al-Durrah in 2000 and the documentary by Esther Schapira, *Das Kind, Der Tod und Die Wahrheit* (The Child, the Death and the Truth) (2009). In this case analysis we see that objectification is achieved precisely through image manipulation, which is presented as a tool for analysing reality. In the final section I analyse one of the most powerful visual strategies for constructing objectivity in a documentary, namely, the manipulation of temporality. In the conclusions I reflect on the supposed rationality and scientific nature of objectifying documentaries, as well as their epistemic ideology.

## 2. Documentary realism

Many theorists of documentary share Gombrich's thesis about representation (1977: 89-90). Leaving aside non-fiction films[1] that speak to us about the world from a "non-realist" perspective (documentaries whose approach is subjective, lyrical, philosophical or satirical, etc.), most theorists who have set out to describe the style peculiar to documentary realism have relied on two ideas: first, that different types of representation use different systems of conventions; and second, that generally accepted realist representations use visual conventions analogous to certain characteristics of human vision.

In "From Real to Reel: Entangled in Non-Fiction Film", Carroll states that documentary realism –which, based on Bazin's theory, he calls "deep-focus realism"– resembles everyday experience in that both share a certain spontaneity and freedom in the scanning of surrounding reality. The slackening of the director's control over the filming and editing is received by the audience as a freedom to assimilate the succession of images in their own way. "This freedom is called realistic because it is analogous of the kind of choice and freedom we experience when we scan everyday reality for information on how things stand" (Carroll, 1983: 243). This means that the types of images and the montage of the film leave

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[1] Note that in this article I follow the distinction proposed by Plantinga (1997: 26), among others, between non-fiction film and documentary, documentary being a subgenre of non-fiction film, which also includes social documents such as journalistic and historical film.

space for the spectator not to have to mould herself to the director's preconceptions about the facts.

Carroll notes how this style of documentary is related to modern cinema, especially *cinéma vérité*, with its search for authenticity through increased spontaneity, framing and camera movement (Carroll, 1983: 243), and so also argues that although these visual qualities can be said to be realistic, they do not necessarily imply any greater faithfulness to the facts. This allows him to broaden the "realism" category to include other types or styles that can establish other kinds of analogies with visual perception: "We should speak of Soviet Realism, Neorealism, Kitchen Sink and Super Realism. None of these Realisms strictly correspond to or duplicate reality, but rather make pertinent (by analogy) aspects of reality absent in other styles" (1983: 244).

In *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols reflects at length on realism in documentary. In general terms, realism refers to a style that can be described in terms of the use of certain stylistic conventions, rhetorical rules and a certain commitment to the facts. For Nichols, insofar as every documentary constructs some kind of representation of the world, the filmmaker must negotiate with these categories and decide how far to adopt those conventions and rules and whether to modify or challenge them (Nichols, 1991; 1997: 218).

First, for Nichols, the difference between the realistic style in documentary and the realistic style in fiction film (which already is used as a catch-all for stylistic, authorial and period options) lies not so much in its stylistic marks as in its functions. "In fiction, realism serves to make a plausible world seem real; in documentary, realism serves to make an argument about the historical world persuasive" (Nichols, 1997: 217). One of the most widely consumed types of realist documentary, albeit only one of many, is the television news programme and the news report. The documentaries that first established the conventions of documentary realism include observational documentaries, such as those of Raymond Depardon and Frederick Wiseman, although, as we will see in the examples cited further on, other earlier documentary filmmakers also included elements of the realistic style in their films.

Nichols notes that the realist documentary adopts the perspective of an observer –the observer's singular position in relation to the object– and may even reproduce the imperfections, arbitrariness and contingencies that can intrude upon an observer's subjective perception of a particular phenomenon. In a realist documentary, these typical formal imperfections, which classical fiction film seeks to avoid, structure the formal organisation through which the view a subject would naturally have of the scene is transmitted. The typical marks of documentary realism are the marks of the presence of subjectivities (Nichols, 1997: 239), i.e., the subjectivity of the cameraman and the director and also that of witnesses, who maintain their own particular points of view. Typical examples of this would be the unstable scenes in *The Battle of Saint Pietro* (1945) and the straight-to-camera shots that betray the presence of the interviewer in *In the Year of the Pig* (1968) (Nichols, 1997: 239).

What best defines the realist style, however, is the element of contingency introduced by these presences, which is manifested in a lack of control over certain aspects of the scene. Imperfect framing, background noises, inaudible speech, gaps in the action: features such as these produce "a heightened sense of the actual process of recording what was said and done" (Nichols, 1997: 239-240). For the realist nature of a documentary to be detected, it is essential that all these formal qualities of the image appear uncontrolled, spontaneous and almost unavoidable given the circumstances. See, for example, the *War Tapes* (2006) documentary, put together entirely from recordings made by three soldiers in Iraq, or *Born into Brothels* (2004), which includes images recorded by children in Calcutta.

As we see, Nichols simply broadens the arguments put forward by Carroll in 1983 regarding the relationship between documentary realism and modern cinema, based on an

analogy between perception and image in terms of spontaneity and contingency. When a documentary or a fiction film seeks to establish such analogies with perception, it adopts a realist style. For the same reason, however, both authors consider these analogies to be stylistic conventions that offer no guarantee as to the authenticity of what is narrated. At most they play the game of verisimilitude and when certain conventions lose credibility for audiences, they are replaced by others.

Conversely, although qualities analogous to perception may suggest authenticity, qualities apparently contrasting with perception need not necessarily destroy documentary credibility. Not only do image editing and an omniscient voice-over not necessarily hinder our perception of the scene; they can actually help us contextualise it, relate it to our expectations and prior knowledge and so interpret it in the way the director intends. Another element that is foreign to the tradition of realist cinema but common in documentary is the interview. Interviews are usually limited to witnesses or characters involved in the action and are often an integral part of the events themselves (Nichols, 1993: 70).

These characters and their versions of the facts are subject to the logic of the facts as presented by the narrator. The abovementioned elements, which do not directly represent the facts, serve to reconstruct the context in which the action is to be interpreted, introduce the subjects that take part in the action and establish the logic of the facts. Although in our everyday perception of documentary images these elements tend to go more or less unnoticed, they should not be underestimated: as Stella Bruzzi says, without them and their contextualising function the image would be unintelligible (2000: 39).

Documentary realism presents itself as a witness to a world that has certain general characteristics. Nichols explains that documentary realism constructs a world ordered by the law of cause and effect and presents a logical view of the world. Its aim is to give an intelligible version of events, using the image as a document or evidence of those events. The image acquires what Nichols calls an indicative nexus with reality (Nichols, 1997: 197 ff.), i.e., it is presented as a deferred copy of events that we now understand. The image takes on the role of an open, transparent window, while the director and narrator take on that of detached, impartial observers, presences which remain unnoticed and whose invisibility allows the spectator to become the stone guest at the scene.

Summing up, Nichols says, "the realist style in documentary also supports the text in the historical world. It is a mark of authenticity, which testifies that the cameraman and therefore also the director 'have been there' and so provides a guarantee that we too 'are there', seeing the historical world through the transparent amber of indicative images and the realist style" (Nichols, 1997: 235).

We cannot conclude our description of the characteristics of documentary realism without discussing the Plantinga perspective. Drawing on Pierce's theory of the sign, Plantinga argues that the qualities of documentary are parallel to those of the photographic image, which can be iconic, indexical or symbolic. An iconic image is one that resembles the referent; both pictorial and photographic images can be iconic (Plantinga, 1997: 41). An image is indexical if there is a causal relationship between the object and its representation and the representation can be produced with a mechanical device (1995: 58). And a symbolic image refers to a signified by convention.

Plantinga defines the documentary as a representation that asserts something about the world as true: "asserted veridical representation". As we would see them, not all documentaries represent reality indexically, but those that do, adopt a realist style. In any case, Plantinga explains very well that indexicality is not a criterion of truthfulness about the object of representation (1997: 65 ff.), as the event could have been constructed for the occasion, as in fiction films. In fact, in the paradigm of the digital image, indexicality of the image can scarcely be assumed to indicate truthfulness (1997: 67). Plantinga therefore shows

that many of the conditions that determine whether a documentary is taken to be truthful lie outside the images themselves. They may depend on the argument put forward by the documentary or on other factors completely external to the argument (Plantinga, 2005: 115). They may also lie in aspects external to the documentary itself, as we shall now see.

## 3. Distancing: conditions of documentary objectivity

So far we have seen that the leading documentary theorists define the realist style mainly in terms of the concept of iconicity or resemblance to the referent, which is supported by the indexicality of the image, although they also state that this indexicality does not make the images true. Pasolini himself, in *Heretical Empiricism*, referred to realist documentary as the style which, because its strength is founded on sensorial qualities, most effectively conceals the mediation and its own possible falsehood.[2] That is why, for a documentary to be judged as truthful, it must rely on other external factors. For Plantinga, a documentary's credibility depends on a number of factors that are exogenous and complementary to the images: factors that have to do with the beliefs a community projects onto the film genre, the producer, the distributor and the place in which the documentary is shown (Plantinga, 1997: 16; on Plantinga, Torregrosa, 2008: 311).

Nichols interprets Plantinga's institutional factors symbolically. Objectivity is "informing about what has been done or said in the historical world and whether it has been done or said by institutional apparatuses, especially the State; objectivity means conveying official versions with a minimum of scepticism and doubt" (Nichols, 1997: 243). Thus, a realist documentary can acquire objective status if the subjective view of the director coincides with the institutional view. For a documentary filmmaker, in a world in which institutional information may be mere propaganda or content that is impossible to corroborate, an objective positioning is tantamount to an abdication of responsibility for the truthfulness of what is said by the social agents. The documentary filmmaker thus distances herself with respect to the truthfulness of the facts and seeks merely to give testimony, through the realist style, of her own presence as witness (Nichols, 1997: 244).

Stella Bruzzi analyses various documentary images (including the Zapruder film of the assassination of J.F. Kennedy) and comes to the conclusion that these images are accepted as objective documents because of their lack of premeditation, intention or authorship. The distance they establish in relation to reality is the result of the disappearance of the authorial subject (Bruzzi, 2000: 14 ff.).

To conclude, we can establish that, while documentary realism must convey the sensation of coming face to face with events, objectivity is only achieved when mechanisms are in place that desubjectivise the recording, whether through the absence of intentionality (Zapruder recording) or because the recording is endorsed by an institution. The imposition of a certain institutional detachment can convert a recording, whether realistic or not, into an objective document.

## 4. The objectifying documentary: definition and methodology

So far we have seen that objectivity depends on factors external to the visual document which distance the document from authorial subjectivity. Here, I appropriate the concept of distancing but apply it to another type of factor. The factors I refer to are peculiar to documentary: filmic strategies that intensify a documentary's value as objective truth. In general, I am referring to aesthetic image editing tools that convert the represented world into an objective world, a world perceived through viewing tools that are accepted by a

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[2] For a more detailed discussion of this subject, see Vighi, F. (2002). Beyond objectivity: The utopian in Pasolini's documentaries. *Textual Practice 16*(3), 495.

community of spectators. Because of their power to objectivise what is represented, I refer to documentary films that use these tools as objectifying documentaries.

This type of documentary could be understood as having evolved from two other types of documentary: the archive or compilation documentary (Weinrichter, 2005; García, 2006) and the popular science documentary. The archive documentary uses and reinterprets found footage; in doing so, it displays a certain degree of critical awareness in respect of the image, although it still strives for the appearance of transparency and direct denotation. Classic examples are *Why We Fight* (1942), by Frank Capra, and the series *The March of Time* (1935-1951), although documentaries that rely mainly on the use of archive footage are still one of the main types of documentary today. The popular science documentary, in contrast, uses maps, diagrams and image manipulation effects as didactic tools to more easily visualize verbal information. The use of these editing tools does not conflict with the abstract object of the film's discourse, which therefore does not refer to the historical world. The modern origin of the popular science documentary is to be found in science series such as *Cosmos* (1980), although graphic resources are present even in Joris Ivens' *The 400 Millions* (1939) (Mendoza, 2008: 120).

Thus, the documentaries I would like to examine combine found footage and editing tools to construct a discourse on the historical world that makes a claim to knowledge and is accepted as (objective) truth. The persuasive power of such tools consists not so much in giving a close-up view of events (the view of someone who "has been there") as in offering a desubjectified, objective version to which the community of spectators must assent. Carroll observed that in order to convey objectivity a documentary can emulate certain features of scientific discourse, such as "patterns of reasoning, routines for assessing evidence, means of weighing the comparative significance of different types of evidence, and standards for observations [and] experimentation... shared by practitioners in that field" (Carroll, 1983: 231). Considering that one of its main strengths lies in constructing a persuasive argument around socially relevant events, the objectifying documentary has certain similarities to the trial documentary, although it differs from the trial documentary in that it presents itself as impartial and uses image manipulation tools as epistemic evidence.

The objectifying documentary does not fit in the taxonomy given by Nichols in *The Representation of Reality*. According to Nichols' classification, we could say that the objectifying documentary uses strategies proper to the observational documentary (distanced narration of events), the interactive documentary (interviews with witnesses and specialists) and the reflexive documentary (explicit reference to the mechanisms of representation). In its reflexive dimension, the objectifying documentary references other news stories or images and analyses them critically, often deconstructing their context and their visual and narrative conventions. Yet despite its closeness to reflexive documentary, the objectifying documentary maintains an epistemological assumption regarding reality. As we shall see, in this critical awareness of the image lies part of its rhetorical strength: its ability to criticise the manipulation of images in order to offer a different version of the facts. It hardly needs pointing out that this strategy raises certain questions.

Examples of documentaries on historical reality that make significant use of graphic representations include *Behind the Big News: Propaganda and the CFR* (2007), *Inside Job* (2010), *Everything Is a Rich Man's Trick* (2014) and *Can We Do It Ourselves?* (2015). Documentaries that question the original versions of certain news stories and offer new readings through objectifying strategies include *Bosnia. Lost Images* (2003), *Fallujah, the Hidden Massacre* (2004), *The Child, the Death and the Truth* (2009) (which I will analyse later

in this article) and, more recently, *Ciutat Morta* (2013). This type of strategy is also common in news analysis programmes on television.[3]

Before I present the main objectifying strategies, I must explain the methodological perspective I have adopted. Discarding methodologies such as narrative semiotics, production and audience analysis, feminism, post-structuralism and so on, I adopt aesthetics as my perspective. This is an unusual perspective to adopt in documentary analysis. Only Noël Carrol (1996) and John Corner (2003), with whom I agree on many points, have done so explicitly. Corner enumerates the aspects of documentary that an aesthetic analysis must address, dividing them into two levels. The first level concerns a phenomenology of the object. It encompasses pictorial, aural and narratological elements. The pictorial analysis must address the visual sub-elements proper to the moving image, which Corner subdivides into three: the objects represented, the qualities produced by the camera and the temporal organisation. The second level is that of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline and therefore concerns the consequences that the abovementioned elements may have on the manner of constructing a world (epistemology) and acting in it (ethics and ideology).

In summary, aesthetics as a methodology first conducts a phenomenological analysis of the audiovisual object in order to come to a reflection on how the audiovisual object constructs a way of perceiving and thinking the world. Aesthetics as a methodology can justify a response to the deep gnoseological dimension of audiovisual products (their ideology, in a broad sense) that we referred to at the outset.

## 5. Strategies of the objectifying documentary

In presenting documentary's objectifying strategies I follow Corner's classification. The strategies are those I have identified through a viewing of the examples cited earlier, which include three types of elements: pictorial, aural and narrative. I illustrate these elements through the analysis of a particular case, which will allow me to once again focus on some specific strategies relating to temporality. In the conclusions, I develop a critical and philosophical reflection on the possible consequences of this type of documentary.

To understand the strategies used by the objectifying documentary, we must bear in mind that the purpose of this kind of documentary is to clarify or reveal something that is usually already known but has lost credibility. The objectifying documentary therefore presents itself as a metatext. The realist view, if it has been presented, is no longer convincing and so the closeness and spontaneity of the realist style have been abandoned.

The types of strategy sought now are those of desubjectified, methodical analysis of the facts (in part, this is already understood in Nichols, 1997: 243). This analysis presents itself as a dissection, in which the most precise devices must be expertly handled. The community to which the objectifying documentary is directed, which as a general rule shares the director's epistemic conventions, can verify for itself the version of the facts that is presented. Viewing a documentary that lays claim to objectivity is like attending the dissection of a corpse: once one has identified certain tools and consents to their use, one is sure to agree with the physician's diagnosis.

First among the various aesthetic tools of the objectifying documentary is the use of multiple takes of the same action. An objectifying documentary brings together all the available takes of an event and assembles them consecutively to repeat the same action from

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[3] See, for example, the smear campaign against the Catalan police on the Antena 3 television channel during 2007 http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=ep28yK94vuo&feature=related, minute 1'15″; the report on the death of a businessman in the Raval neighbourhood of Barcelona following an arrest in 2013 https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=x4_qHL5moSU, minute 6'49″; or the analysis of a similar case in England http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYM3KOByTDw

different angles, like Peckinpah's overlapping scenes. The epiphany of the phenomenon in the realist style thus gives way, in the objectifying documentary, to a spatial deconstruction of the phenomenon. There is no longer just one point of view; no image on its own fully captures the facts. It is only by concatenating all possible perspectives that one can obtain a more complete view of the event. The receiver must then juxtapose the different facets of the action and reconstruct in her imagination a unified whole. As we will see, the information provided by the narrator, along with aerial photographs, diagrams and even digital reconstructions of the location, will play an important role in achieving this goal.

A second objectifying convention is the practise of isolating a particular detail of the image that went undetected in the original take. The tools most commonly used to direct attention to what at first viewing may seem a minor element are reframing, which might include picking out the element in question with a superimposed circle or square, and signalling, e.g., using a superimposed arrow to point out the element of interest. Often, everything outside the reframed portion of the image is masked out by applying a colour or black-and-white filter. Another option is to amplify the part of the image containing the detail in question, so that the detail occupies a larger portion of the screen, leaving the rest (its context) off-screen.

Thanks to this effect, details that before were invisible to us suddenly appear and prove to be indispensable to a correct reading of the facts. In return, we accept certain disadvantages as unavoidable consequences of this visual tool: on the one hand, our view and the scene itself become even more than fragmented than before; on the other, the texture of the image is altered as the image is enlarged, while the framed object loses definition with increased granularity. Once again, a voice-over describing what we are supposed to see will be vital in order to compensate for this loss of quality.

Another pictorial resource that has a powerful objectifying effect is the use of graphics to illustrate information. Graphics, often with no mention of data collection methodology, always suggest information of a quantitative, scientific kind. And yet their real usefulness, as Carlos Mendoza (2008: 124) points out, is not so much scientific as didactic. *Inside Job* (2010), with its constant use of graphics to visualize economic data, is a good example of this. From my point of view, however, in documentaries on historical reality, the rhetorical function is also an important consideration. See, for example, the evidence on the Srebrenica massacre and the Hague trial that the documentary *Bosnia. Lost Images* tries to present (minutes 18′ 48″ – 21').

Another important pictorial element of an aesthetic analysis, according to Corner, concerns the temporality of images. We have already mentioned the repetition of the action from different points of view. Another example is the alteration of the temporality of the image through slow motion or freeze-frame. It is tacitly understood that the event cannot be adequately comprehended at the speed at which it is conventionally viewed and that manipulating the image allows new aspects to be observed.

In an aesthetic analysis, the second main aesthetic aspect is the aural element. Apart from the voice-over, which rises above all the images, there are other significant differences in aural characteristics compared to the realist style. In the realist style it can sometimes be appropriate to retain the original background noise, even though it hampers the intelligibility of the action, whereas in the objectifying documentary such background noise is filtered and manipulated, so as to isolate the only relevant information in the representation of the event.

Another aural element, this one related to temporality, worth pointing out is that when the action is played back in slow motion or repeated or the image is enlarged, the soundtrack may consist of silence or sounds. The sounds usually are not music but monotonous, synthetic, minimalist sounds: machine sounds or digital effects that accompany the suspension of time or its repetition outside the chronological narrative of

events. This can be a way of acoustically representing the introduction of an artificial digital mechanism, which in the documentary analysis connotes technology, sophistication and certainly dehumanisation, or at least desubjectification.

The third aspect of an aesthetic analysis concerns the narrative elements. Note that the narration of an objectifying documentary is not intended to be a realistic narration of events that articulates a chronological order. An objectifying narrative will retell the story it refers to, but it must do more than that. Insofar as it is to be contrasted with an official version, which it is intended to qualify or rebut, the objectifying documentary will have a different narrative structure. It may start with the discovery of suspicions about the official version or of facts that contradict the official version. From that starting point it will proceed in the form of an investigation, which may involve analysing particular aspects of the official narrative, isolating them and comparing them with other events, or assessing them based on knowledge established subsequently. The narrative structure of the objectifying documentary will therefore tend to be that of an investigation, which may be presented chronologically or by theme.

Closely linked to this narrative is the presence of certain characters that are typical of this kind of documentary. The methodological analysis and disciplinary knowledge presented in an objectifying documentary are usually verbalised through experts. Professionals are called upon to issue expert opinions on various aspects of the event. Economists, lawyers, ballistics experts, forensic pathologists, historians and anthropologists, lip-readers, leading authorities in highly specialised fields all apply their knowledge on the ground to establish the cause–effect relationship that best describes the phenomenon: where a bullet came from, what words the subject uttered, what a particular ritual symbolises, and so on. Their experience and knowledge serve to dispel doubts, remove ambiguities and render the event intelligible. Now we see; before, we merely watched. Now we recognise the underlying semantic layers of the impenetrable signs that passed before our eyes.

Before moving on to present a case study, I will end this section with a brief reflection. Because of their use of aesthetic and narrative strategies analogous to scientific discourse, objectifying documentaries have a very different appearance from realist documentaries. In objectifying documentaries, the image recording, broadcasting and manipulation mechanisms and the scientific studies brought to bear (the expert witnesses) occupy the foreground. There is no attempt to hide these manipulations; on the contrary, their presence is immediately apparent. And yet their function is not always clear.

Nichols (1993: 11) proposes that a documentary which openly exhibits editing and discourse construction mechanisms is a reflexive documentary that exposes the conventions of representation. But that is not the case of the objectifying documentary: the objectifying documentary analyses archive material and establishes a certain distance with respect to the events represented, but it also presents a more profound view of the events. Emulating scientists and their methodical experiments, aesthetic image manipulation (enlargement, reframing, slow motion replay) takes on the appearance of a rigorous, positive use of knowledge. The objectifying documentary thus maintains the will to construct a denotative act about an event and the belief in a world of intelligible historical circumstances.

To conclude this section, it should be noted that these strategies are subject to historical variation. Here, we have described the tools most used today, whereas twenty years ago Linda Williams described how artificial strategies such as recreations of events by actors were starting to be introduced in documentary in the early nineties as a means of overcoming the subjectivity of the witness, that is, as a tool of objective reconstruction (Williams, 1993: 13). According to Williams, these strategies were intended to distance documentary from *cinéma vérité*, which had turned into auteur cinema; yet such

mechanisms are marginal nowadays. It is worth noting, in passing, that if documentary has at different times sought persuasive strategies to objectivise a view of events, this means that the category of objectification must be atemporal to some degree.

## 6. An example of documentary objectification

For a case analysis, I now turn to a prize-winning documentary that was well received in the documentary filmmaking world for its research ethics and its reflection on the challenges of contemporary documentary journalism: *Das Kind, der Tod und die Wahrheit* (The Child, the Death and the Truth) (2009).[4] It was shown for the first time in Spain in 2010 at the Miniput festival in Barcelona, where the director, Esther Schapira, was invited to speak about her extensive research and the responsibility of journalists today in the world of the image.

The documentary analyses the media treatment of the murder of eight-year-old Muhammad Al-Durrah in September 2000 on the second day of the Second Palestinian Intifada. The first news report, 59 seconds long, was aired by the French television channel France 2 on 28 September, the day of the events, in the 8 pm news bulletin. In the report, the chief correspondent for the area, Charles Enderlin, accused the Israeli military of killing the child and wounding the father.

At the time, the report caused a great commotion, at least in public opinion in the West and the Middle East, launching a long debate that has still not been settled. Radical Islamism has used the images as an icon of the brutality of the Israeli armed forces and as a justification for executions (Daniel Pearl) and terrorist attacks (Osama Bin Laden). Muhammad Al-Durrah's father was invited by Islamic countries to give talks about his experience as a victim, during which he would sign picture cards of his son, now considered a martyr. In some schools, children are even shown reconstructions of the scene, using computer animation, in which an Israeli soldier is seen pointing his gun directly at the child (there are no real-life images of this).

The original news report broadcast by France 2, produced in a realist style, was structured along orthodox lines: it spoke in general terms about the clashes between the Israeli army and the Palestinian protesters and an escalation of the violence. In the final part it explained the wretched situation in which father and son were caught in the crossfire and became the target of Israeli bullets: "Another burst of gunfire. Muhammad is dead and his father, seriously wounded. A Palestinian policeman and an ambulance driver have also lost their lives in the gunfight."[5]

The report displays the typical resources of realistic documentary representation: the conflict situation described by the voice-over is illustrated through impersonal images; then, there is a description of the events that the images are supposed to show. The images are not always clear: inaccurate, shaky, out-of-focus framing; sudden zooms in and out; objects that obstruct the view; unrecognisable noises, as well as shouts and heavy gunfire.

Shortly after the report was broadcast, when voices started to be heard suggesting the killing might have been staged, Charles Enderlin put together a second report on the story. This brief, 15-minute documentary was intended to supply evidence for what had been shown in summary form a few weeks earlier. It was thus presented as a response that reinforced the first version of the events. The narration was still chronological, but Enderlin

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[4] The theme of the cycle in which the documentary was shown at INPUT2010 was "Does Anybody Care About Investigative Journalism?" (Catalogue, 32). Accessible at http://www.input-tv.org/history/2010_2012/2010/. The documentary was also shortlisted for an Association of International Broadcasting Award in 2009 and was part of a film cycle at Miniput 2010.

[5] The news report is not to be found on the France 2 website. The two-minute news report can be found, in low quality, at: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xbl5r2_le-reportage-de-charles-enderlin-ob_news (last accessed: 23 September 2014).

used repetition of certain actions from different points of view, as well as slow motion and freeze-frame, with reframing of the image. This documentary not only narrated and showed certain events; it also argued and gave evidence for what it narrated. It represented a shift from realist documentary to a type of documentary that used different argumentative strategies, asserting a claim to objectivity.[6]

Even so, more and more journalists and intellectuals accused the account given by Charles Enderlin of being false. Enderlin and France 2 responded in 2004 with three libel suits, which they won in 2007. Philippe Karsenty, one of the libel defendants, appealed against the judge's decision and, after various reviews, the case reached the French Supreme Court, which as of September 2014 had still not issued a decision.

Esther Schapira's documentary *Das Kind, der Tod und die Wahrheit* (2009) presents extensive research into the events that took place in the Gaza Strip on that 28 September 2000 and the subsequent events sparked by those images. The German director shows a critical awareness of the power of images but never loses sight of the primary goal, namely, to tell the truth about the events.[7]
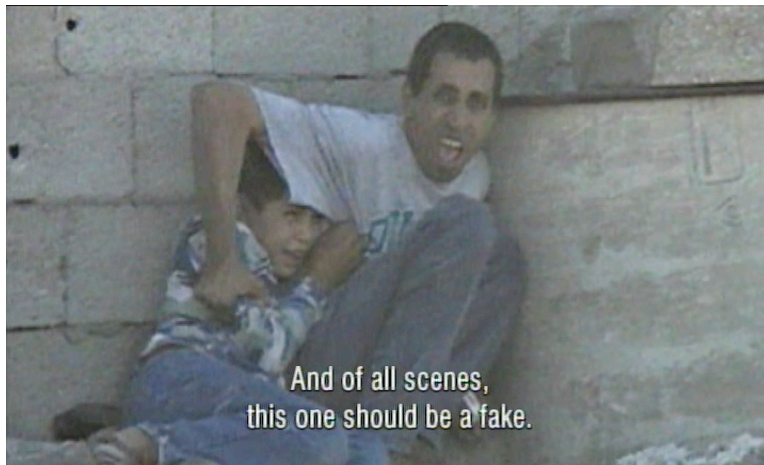


Minute 1' 40"



Minute 3' 10"

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[6] Enderlin's 15′ 21″ documentary has been removed from the France 2 website.

[7] Besides the mention of truth in the title itself, the director also presents Philipe Karsenty as a "self-appointed truth seeker". Karsenty himself, on winning one of the libel suits brought against him by France 2, said, "This is a victory for the truth over the lies spread by France 2". In her presentation of the documentary at the 2010 Miniput festival in Barcelona, Esther Schapira once again laid emphasis on journalists' responsibility to preserve the truth.

Her intention becomes very clear within the first three minutes. After showing a fragment of the news clip on the death of Muhammad Al-Durrah, in which the voice of the French correspondent is clearly heard reporting the child's death, the voice-over reports a categorical rebuttal of this statement: "That the whole things was a propaganda lie, spread by the television channel France 2, which presented the child's death to millions of viewers as a fact" (minute 1′ 30″ -1′ 59″). The narrator goes on: "[...] that the scene was staged, the son wasn't killed and the father wasn't wounded" (1′ 40″). At another point, the narrator asks rhetorically whether the cameraman who recorded the images, Talal Abu-Rahma, can be considered a reliable witness. Taking sides, the director sets out to prove a particular version of the events

The epistemic expectations are high and, as the documentary proceeds, it presents some apparently revealing evidence. Most of the evidence it provides, however, was prepared by Karsenty for the trial. To this evidence, the German director adds her own particular visual study of the images of the gun battle, along with the findings of an earlier investigation carried out on the spot. Of particular interest to us is to observe the aesthetic strategies (pictorial, aural, and narrative, following Corner's classification) the director uses to present an investigation of the facts that aspires to objectivity.

The first use of objectifying aesthetic tools appears at minute 7′ 11″. An aerial photograph of the crossroads at which the events took place is shown; then a fragment of this image is framed and enlarged, shading out the rest. Note also that just when this image appears, we hear in the background a high-pitched sound like a synth violin, which evokes a certain suspension of time and heightens our expectation. The documentary thus gives an overview of the location and situates the agents. After this, the director is ready to move on to specific images of the actions.

Let's look at a second example. In the sequence 25′ 15″ – 26′ 34″, Karsenty questions whether the child was hit by the bullets, as there is no blood to be seen in any of the frames. The narrator immediately analyses the images with the viewer. She also points out that the boy covers his face, as if he was faking. In this short sequence we see how the director uses slow motion, freeze-frame, framing with a red outline and enlargement of a detail. Whenever the images are frozen, a persistent sound is heard, heightening the sensation that time has been artificially suspended.



Minute 25′ 38″

Besides the pictorial strategies, it is important also to analyse the narrative and argumentative strategies. In narrative terms, the documentary tells the story of the

construction of certain events based on certain images and their ideological power, in which journalists and their critics also play a role. For this reason, in reconstructing this narrative we must identify the persuasive arguments each person uses to defend her or his version of the facts.

The first argumentative resource consists of pointing out the political use of images of child victims in the media. Battles, the narrator says, are won with bombs, hearts with images; images of children are always the most powerful ammunition (minute 2′ 33″). The director's intention in using this argument is unclear. It is as if she wanted to discredit the veracity of these images for the fact that they have been used ideologically. She does it again at minute 8, when she places the Al-Durrah images in the context of the so-called Pallywood phenomenon, in reference to the alleged staging of victim situations by Palestinians for the benefit of foreign camera crews[8].

Another widely used tool is the interview with experts, especially scientific experts. Schapira uses expert witnesses from a range of specialities: a historian who has followed the Pallywood phenomenon states that the scene was probably staged (15′ 15″); two ballistics experts try to prove that the shots could not have come from the Israeli guard post (17′ 45″ and 22′ 43″); based on the testimony of a lip-reader (23′ 44″), the narrator states that the father, in the middle of the shooting, accuses the Palestinians themselves of having killed his son; an expert in biometric facial comparison shows that the traits of Muhammad Al-Durrah do not match those of the child at the funeral (43′ 44″); a forensic pathologist affirms that the bullets that hit the father could only have come from behind the wall (30′ 40″), while other scars on the father's body came from an earlier surgical intervention. The persuasive effect of these experts and their tools is tremendous; and yet Esther Schapira fails to note that the versions they present are not consistent with one another; in some cases they are not even consistent with the evidence Schapira herself constructs.
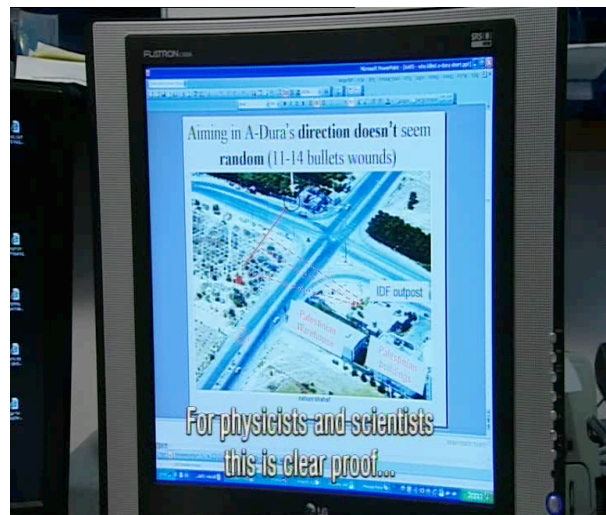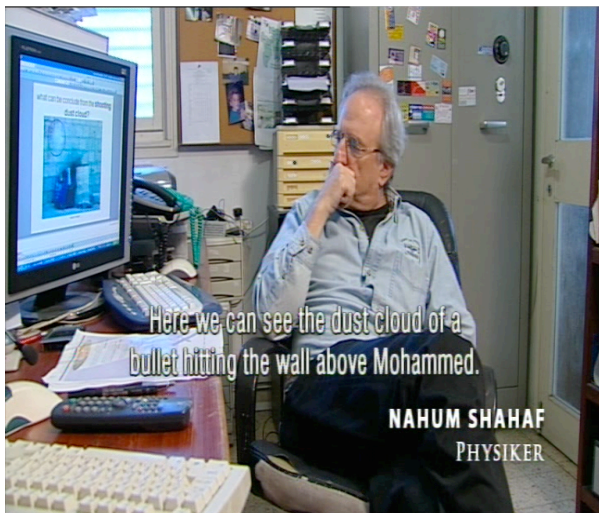


Ballistics specialist. Minute 18′ 21″

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[8] K. Payne (2005: 81–93) makes some very pertinent qualifications on this subject.
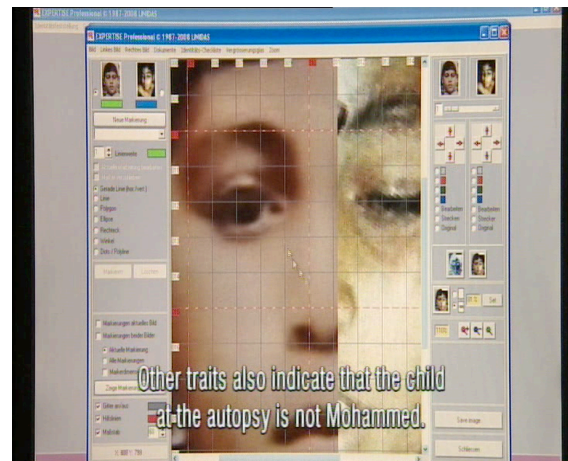
Facial recognition expert. Minute 48' 21"

## 7. Time-altering aesthetic effects as an objectification strategy

The manipulation of temporality is, in my view, one of the most powerful and recurring visual strategies used in the objectifying documentary[9]. I shall therefore describe the mechanisms of temporal manipulation in more detail and critically analyse its effects. First, I should stress that manipulating the temporality of an image does not entail concealing the trick from the spectator: everyone recognises a freeze frame or slow motion. The director wants the manipulation to be obvious, so that it is perceived as a tool of analysis. In the Schapira documentary, even sound may be used to further emphasise the artificiality of the image. By this means, the spectator's attention is drawn to the epistemic power of the specific images, while a voice-over describes what the spectator should be seeing.

However, image manipulation has a further potential that the objectifying documentary only partly acknowledges. When a documentary manipulates the temporality of an image, when it freezes, slows down, repeats and changes the order of events, it does it so that the spectator may see something better, pay closer attention to certain details and gain a deeper knowledge. Image manipulation is thus presented as a cognitive tool, analogous to a magnifying glass that enriches the viewer's knowledge of the facts. And yet the objectifying documentary fails to acknowledge the other side of the coin. When it alters the temporality of an event, it radically transforms that event. Temporally modifying a sequence entails, first of all, transforming the tempo or pace of the action. As the legendary Muybridge experiment showed, slowing the pace of a sequence of movements causes intermediate spaces to appear where before there was continuity and so causes parts of movements to appear that had not been detected before. In these cases, the cause-effect relationship between one movement and the next is disrupted by the appearance of intermediate movements.

Second, the temporal fragmentation of actions can also invert the cause-effect relationship. In a brilliant analysis of the trial of the police officers who beat Rodney King in 1991, Nichols shows how temporal manipulation of the image by the defence lawyers gave plausibility to the unlikely claim that the officers were reacting with blows to threats made by an incontrollably strong and violent black man (Nichols, 1994: 31)[10].

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[9] Plantinga shares this idea. For example, "one of the most important relationships between discourse and projected world is temporal" (1995: 89).
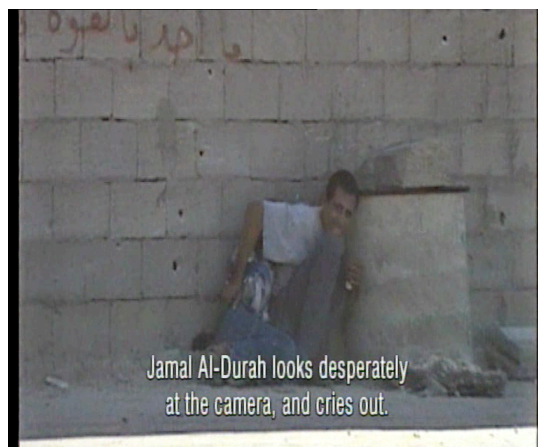[10] Despite his lucidity, Nichols' opinion that playing the image back in slow motion does not make the spectators see more things is surprising.

The manipulation of temporality also has other consequences for cognition of the represented phenomenon. Decades ago, Rudolf Arnheim drew attention to the expressive aspects of events. According to Arnheim (2002: 384), effects such as slow motion and fast motion change the forces involved in the action as we perceive it: some forces may simply be changed, while others may appear or disappear. In other words, not only do we see intermediate events, but the performativity of the actions, their intensity and their accents are seen differently.

Before Arnheim, others had already explored various aspects of gesture and facial expression. The early studies by Heider and Simmel in the mid-1940s launched the debate about the attribution of intentional causes to movements. [11] These two psychologists observed how subjects who viewed a short animated film in which three geometrical shapes are seen moving around tended to attribute similar types of intentions to the shapes, based on their movements and relative sizes. More recently, Visch and Tan have analysed how the same act can be perceived as tragic, comic or sad, depending on the pace of the action (Visch & Tan, 2009).

Needless to say, things are not so simple in documentary. The narrative context is very important and it is impossible to elicit any reading we choose simply by altering the speed of movements and gestures. As we have said, however, changing the temporality of the image has dramatic effects on the transformation of the agents' intentions, which can then very easily be oriented by a new version of the facts.

Esther Schapira's documentary is a perfect example of what I have been saying: the image is used as evidence, and to acquire the status of evidence it is played back in slow motion while a voice-over tells us what we should be seeing. At minute 12' 25'', for example, the director presents an interpretation of the boy's movements and those of his father that diverges from Enderlin's. While for Enderlin they were gestures of suffering (12′ 20″) preceding the child's death, for Schapira they can be interpreted as a performance. At minute 23′ 30″ the intention is to discredit the authenticity of the father's shout. In Schapira's account, the father looks towards the camera, in the direction of the Arab position, and according to the lip-reading specialist, shouts, "You've killed my son!" Schapira suspects this shout is not directed at the Israelis and draws the conclusion that the scene must be staged.



Jamal Al-Durah looks desperately at the camera, and cries out.

There was shooting in this area, from the street and the Pita watchtower.

As a conclusion to this brief analysis, what we find in the scenes in which the image manipulation tools are used is that the truth does not appear differently or more clearly. If I

dispense with the information provided by the narrator's voice-over, I realise I am seeing something different from what I saw before, but I cannot really say I am seeing more.[12] Yet the simple fact that the image manipulation has been presented as an analytical epistemic resource gives it great power of persuasion. That is undoubtedly how it achieves its greatest effect: by appearing as the chief tool for the construction of a discourse of disciplined knowledge.

## 8. Conclusion: truth, expression, reflexivity and rationality

In conclusion, I shall present some thoughts on the categories of truth, expression, reflexivity and rationality in the objectifying documentary.

The objectifying documentary first constructs a discourse about the truth of certain events. As we have seen in the Esther Schapira example, fidelity –the search for and (heroic) defence of the truth of certain facts– is a constant of the objectifying documentary. However, reality is no longer presented as a truth that can be known immediately (as in the realist style) but as a laboratory truth that can be known through supposedly scientific tools and methods of knowledge. The first thing to be deduced from these documentaries is that their mere existence is a sign of the loss of validity of the realist style and the recovery of the classical style of cinema, in which montage, editing, manipulation of temporality, masking, etc. are all part of a language of representation and knowledge of reality. One of the fundamental ideological postulates of this classical style is epistemic and says that even if other agents manipulate an image in order present tendentious versions of events, it is possible to desconstruct those discourses and discover reality using the same images.

Yet despite this epistemic assumption, it has to be said that the analytical effort of the objectifying documentary is not always as persuasive as it seems. There is something paradoxical in the analysis of the image: the more the images are analysed and the more resources are applied to them, the more distant the event becomes. The more a scene is slowed down, frozen and repeated, the more attention tends to focus on the device, while the scene itself recedes. The versions of the scene provided by each fragment also seem more disparate from one another. The same occurs with the experts from different disciplines. After the image has been analysed, contextualised and discussed with the agents involved and the experts, not only does the reality not emerge more clearly; it begins to appear contradictory, equivocal and elusive.

Another important issue regarding the distancing and artificiality of the objectifying processes is that, supposedly, they construct a point of view removed from subjectivity, which therefore anyone should be able to occupy. The aim is to show a disciplined, methodical knowledge, accordant with a modern, almost positivist rationality. And yet slow motion, freeze frames and image enlargements can be highly expressive and spectacular: the event loses the spontaneity of its context and is represented enlarged and monumentalised. Thus, while the objectifying documentary aims to convey a rational and neutral attitude and methodology, it generates in the spectator a singularly emotional reaction: gestures become more expressive; actions, more significant; and thus moral judgments (which so often are based on emotions), more categorical. As Catalá (2006: 111) pointed out, the cinematographic image has an objectifying effect by nature; but this objectification has a very clear fetichistic component. That is to say, the conversion of an

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[12] This paradoxical quality of the image is masterfully exposed in films such as Antonioni's *Blow-Up*. Stella Bruzzi comes to a similar conclusion after analysing the story of the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination: "The ultimate, uncomfortable paradox of the Zapruder film as raw evidence is that the more it is exposed to scrutiny, with frames singled out and details digitally enhanced, the more unstable and inconclusive the images become" (2005: 18). *Redacted*, by Brian de Palma, is a masterly exercise about how different media for representing reality (security cameras, documentaries and television news) fail to capture the complete, complex reality of an event.

event into an object or representation not only allows greater scope for observation but also a degree of spectacularisation of the world. This brings us to our final reflection.

The directors of objectifying documentaries show great awareness of the power of the image in our society. Their work often consists of a metatext that deconstructs the structures of meaning of a pre-existing text. Esther Schapira's documentary is no exception: her criticism of the ideological abuse and manipulation of the image is apposite. Yet despite their critical awareness, these documentaries do not criticise the media as a whole (including fakes). Although their directors are aware of the danger of spectacularisation and faking that threatens television in general, they continue to present a version of events, use editing tools whose rhetorical effects they do not disclose and take a moral stance towards opposing positions. This dual position in relation to the image raises questions as to the ethics of the makers of objectifying documentaries.

What is clear is that these documentaries will continue to be made, with the same or other conventions. Our thirst for the outside world is necessary and inexhaustible. Moreover, documentaries of this kind will be praised for their professional ethics and awarded prizes by specialised juries who, in academic contexts, will still defend the validity of the thought of Debord and Baudrillard. This apparent paradox suggests to us that criticising the media as a whole, whether for their use of spectacle or for their fakery, no longer makes any sense. The more pertinent approach seems to be to criticise particular genres or particular documentaries. Analysis of their conventions and criticism of their epistemological assumptions – that is, the effort to develop media literacy as we have tried to do in this article – is still necessary. At the same time, it is to be hoped that the directors of objectifying documentaries, as necessary as they are, will adopt a consistently self-reflexive attitude.

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