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Envisioning De Sica's Documentary: A Proposal for Narrative Realist Documentary Filmmaking

Parker Stenseth

This fall I served on the jury for a film festival. I joined late in the process and was obligated to screen my category's forty documentary feature entries in about a month. The films ranged from horrendous to incredible, and, during my marathon of critical attention, I learned to put into words a kind of dread that some documentaries would fill me with. It had nothing to do with production quality or subject matter. It came down to the use of form. One of these films, which was eventually selected for the festival, was *Lost Lives*. The logline is as follows: "Inspired by the book of the same name, *Lost Lives* records the circumstances of every man, woman and child who died in a conflict – the Northern Irish 'Troubles.' A reminder that war is hell." I was enthused by the description, but that dissipated when I realized the documentary wasn't only "inspired by the book," it was composed entirely of voiceover readings from the text while glossy B-roll and occasional archival footage flickered by. It was an abridged audiobook with something to look at, and I couldn't, considering my love for the film form, rightly enjoy the product. At our festival, reviews for the film were mixed. Some of our jurors fiercely defended it—often those with a focus on philanthropy and not film—but it always settled on the question of form.

Somewhere in recent history, possibly with the advent of digital editing software, documentaries have ceased to be films in the fullest sense of the term. The tendency has become for documentaries to be approached as "visual essays" with an excessively literary through line—that may exist as voice-over narration, carefully arranged soundbites,

or a combination of the two—overlaid with b-roll that only affirms the literary base, an entity oftentimes capable of existing on its own. If the audio of a film is able to exist on its own, a proper balance has not been struck, and the visuals have become secondary or even, at times, redundant. As a matter of practicality, there will always be a space for this style of documentary filmmaking, but that it has become, overwhelmingly, the default is harmful to the public's and future filmmaker's conception of the film form. The following proposal will outline a new approach to documentary filmmaking that unifies audio and visual aesthetics and coordinates them as an extension of rhetoric by looking at the period of film history that did this first and did it most effectively.

The theory behind Italian neorealist films¹ along with the later traditions of film realism, can be used as a manual for achieving a balanced relationship between aesthetics and rhetoric. So, to begin, it is important to have a brief overview of Italian neorealism and how it pertains to our subject. To do so, I will be using a selection of critical writings by André Bazin because he is still widely read and understood and represents a bridge between the Italian neorealists and modern film theory, some of which he played a significant role in popularizing.

Neorealism: An Overview

The neorealist movement had its roots in revolution, originating at the end of World War II and the fall of Mussolini's government. The films reflected a new social consciousness and gave a platform to the plights of the impoverished and the working class. Writers from an Italian magazine, *Cinema*,² developed the style that would define the

1 This essay will look primarily at the collaborations between Vittorio De Sica and Cesare Zavattini, which by no means is meant to belittle the unmentioned work of the other great neorealist filmmakers.

2 To which Cesare Zavattini was a regular contributor.

movement.³⁴ Tracing back to the early dominance of Russian cinema, notably Sergei Eisenstein, there exists a trend of industries who are engaging with theory in new ways producing a strong and historically significant body of work.

Three qualities that are commonly associated with neorealism are choosing the poor and working class as their subjects, shooting on location, and use of non-actors. Today, Vittorio De Sica is the filmmaker most widely known as a neorealist,⁵ and his films *Shoeshine*, *Bicycle Thieves*, and *Umberto D* are excellent demonstrations of the evolution of neorealism, which, according to Bazin, as a whole “are first and foremost reconstituted reportage. The action could not unfold in just any social context historically neutral, partly abstract like the setting of a tragedy.” What he’s hinting at is that these films, more than any others, are centered on the relationship their subjects have with their setting.⁶ Later realist film movements would reveal that the relationship could be more accurately described as between a subject and a system—in Éric Rohmer’s this often appears as a moral system that the subject is wrestling with—but neorealism hadn’t quite reached this point, which can be seen as an indicator of how the French New Wave later expanded filmic ideas of character.

These films, especially the three listed above, function by proposing a progressive thesis intertwined with the world of the story that is difficult to contend because it is presented as context rather than an argument. To demonstrate using *Bicycle Thieves*, at the beginning of the film Antonio Ricci, played by non-actor Lamberto Maggiorani, has his bike stolen and is unable to work because his position

3 Heavily inspired by the Russian Social Realists (Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Kuleshov, etc.) and advances in film technology.

4 The French New Wave had a similar origin with *Cahiers du Cinema* producing directors such as François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Goddard, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, et Jacques Rivette who were all mentored to varying degrees by André Bazin.

5 Although he never identified with the title.

6 The movement itself was very much the product of the social, political, and economic setting of post-WWII Italy.

pasting advertising bills requires a bicycle. The police are unable to help Antonio, and his own efforts to recover the stolen property are unsuccessful even after tracking down and confronting the thief. Antonio is so desperate that he himself attempts to steal a bicycle but is caught immediately. The owner lets Antonio go when he notices Antonio's son, Bruno, bearing witness to the event. At this, the film ends.

How is this bare-bones overview related to the "thesis" mentioned earlier? Bazin says "the thesis of the film is hidden behind an objective social reality which in turn moves into the background of the moral and psychological drama which could of itself justify the film." The "objective social reality" that Antonio operates in is one in which "the poor must steal from each other in order to survive." In the film it is more nuanced, but this sentence summarizes what has caught Antonio. In screenwriter's terms, the society has become an insurmountable obstacle, barring Antonio from satisfying his "dramatic need." This thesis appears in the scenario written by Cesare Zavattini, but the rhetoric derives its authority from the realist aesthetic contributed by De Sica and his cinematographer Carlo Montuori.

A Realist Aesthetic:

The terms "realist" and "realism" have been brandished about in film since the beginning, so here I will outline what I mean by a realist aesthetic and what traits make the realist aesthetic observable in neorealist films, but first, I would like to dispel the misconception that a good portion of neorealist films' effect comes from their use of non-actors. I would argue that this is only important so far as the audience does not recognize the actors. Oftentimes, even above talent, this is the greatest assets an actor brings to a production, the audience's preconception of them. Whether that's an actor playing the same role in different situations⁷ or an actor challenging the audiences "horizon of

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i.e. Mark Wahlberg, Dwayne Johnson, Ryan Reynolds, Jessie Eisenberg; the actors who rarely act.

expectations"⁸ by playing against type.⁹ A skilled director—and I include casting or ensuring proper casting as part of a skilled director's toolkit—will, given enough time, be able to coax the desired performance out of actor, know or unknown, and non-actor alike. From looking at the film alone—by which I mean ignoring the narrative spun around the making of the film—there is no practical difference between casting an unknown actor and a non-actor. Even the term non-actor itself is deceptive, because in the film they are, in fact, acting. What non-actor really means is person who has not acted before. Once they've committed to act in a film, they are no longer a non-actor, rather, they are an unknown actor, and the purposeful use of the former term while talking about neorealism is an extension of the written rhetoric that surrounds the movement which is important to be aware of while translating the essence of these films into a modern context, since our goal is to translate the films themselves, not the stories that have been told about them.

Transitioning to the films themselves, a realist aesthetic is derived primarily from two filmmaking principles: the cinematography and the story. The former's contribution toward realism, and where most modern films fail, is by shooting their subjects so that the film form does not imbue them with significance. The significance emanates from the subjects themselves and their relationship to the world around them. At first, this may sound abstract, but it can be easily observed. There are established film principles whereby using proximity, angle, and motion, filmmakers craft an emotion. This is half of the principles behind montage theory. For example, a low-angle push-in from a full shot to a medium shot would communicate power or confidence, or an extreme close-up inherently denotes its subject as being of extreme importance. This can be nuanced to the extreme such as in Eisenstein films which

8 A concept developed by Hans Robert Jauss that is defined, in my own words, as the sum of experiences an audience has had or art that they are aware of that forms their ever-fluctuating, preconceived notion of what an artwork will be.

9 i.e. Charlize Theron in *Monster*, Adam Sandler in *Punch-Drunk Love*, or Emma Watson in Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring*.

DeLillo beautifully describes in his novel *Underworld* as “in Eisenstein you note that the camera angle is a kind of dialectic. Arguments are raised and makes theories drift across the screen and instantly shatter,” and even though neorealist films overwhelmingly do not use these techniques, the absence of such a dialectic becomes a dialectic of its own as they purposefully deconstruct film language to shift where the film’s significance comes from. In Eisenstein, and films subscribing to montage theory, significance is derived from the composition individual shots and the juxtaposition of these shots. For films made with an aesthetic of realism, the significance is not from the juxtaposition or even the individual shots, rather from the subject themselves and the presence that is allowed to emanate from them. This is true for De Sica,¹⁰ that he allows his subjects to linger on-screen in a manner that aspires to make their souls tangible. The framing and motion are limited to what is necessary; how can we show the subject satisfactorily and how must we move the camera to keep it that way? This filmic honesty is what gives the films their authority. They give the impression that they’re not trying to convince the audience of anything except the true and plausible presence of their subject.

I invite readers to rewatch *Bicycle Thieves* and count the number of camera placements and movements that are not chosen for most effectively observing the subject. Viewers will note that De Sica establishes three proximities from which to shoot Antonio and cycles through these on the condition of necessity for most of the film. This method of filming is done to avoid one layer of “artifice” in the filmmaking process. It contributes to a realist aesthetic by not indulging in the filmmaking techniques used to distort reality or, more accurately and more importantly, distort the audience’s reaction to the presentation of “reality.”

The second neorealist trait that defines its aesthetic of realism is its frequent addition of spontaneity to narratives. This is antithetical to modern screenwriting practices,¹¹ that has instilled an attitude of

10 And it’s true for Rossellini, Rohmer, Bresson, Kiarostami, and Resnais.

11 The Syd Field, Robert McKee, and Blake Snyder generation.

absolute economy. While this makes sense, and is inevitable for studio pictures, it also strikes me as the best way to remove the texture of life from a project. Paraphrasing Sartre, carefully arranged events are the structure of a life remembered but has nothing to do with the shape of life as it is. There's a balance to be struck, this much is sure, but to achieve a realist aesthetic, by which we mean an aesthetic that presents itself in a way that approaches the presentation of "real life," and to do this, what I've termed as filmic spontaneity, which establishes the possibility of further filmic spontaneity, must be present. Again, to illustrate, I will look at two examples from *Bicycle Thieves* both of which occur during a chase scene. The first is that Antonio's son, Bruno, needs to piss, and so he does. The second occurrence is when it begins to rain which brings a halt to the whole affair. These scenes are not utile—in a conventional sense, by which I mean they do not propel the plot forward—so a modern approach to screenwriting would suggest getting rid of them. But these scenes function by insisting that the world of the film is like our own in the sense that anything might happen. It gives the illusion that events are spontaneous rather than preordained, because it is true, sometimes little boys need to use the restroom and unexpected weather can throw a hitch in the day. What this does to the film as a whole is give the sense that the events did not have to unfold the way they did, rather, they just happened to unfold that way. Bazin describes the rhetorical difference between the two as "a propaganda film would try to prove that the workman could not find his bicycle, and that he is inevitably trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty. De Sica limits himself to showing that the workman could not find his bicycle and that as a result he doubtless will be unemployed again. No one can fail to see that it is the accidental nature of the script that gives the thesis its quality of necessity." By removing the spontaneity from a film, the element that makes the thesis dynamic is also removed. However, I find the opposite can also be true. By including too much spontaneity in a film, the structure and organization that forms the thesis slowly disappears. Too much or not enough are equally harmful to a film's rhetoric, which returns to the theme that it is a matter of balance.

These two considerations, deconstruction of film language and “filmic spontaneity,” are the primary factors that revolutionized the Neorealist aesthetic of realism, but their implications extend to every element of the filmmaking process.

A Reminder on Realism:

From its beginnings, film has had a tendency to be received as realism. Audiences are inclined to believe the images before them. Back to the form’s origins, *L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* remains the mostly widely known of the Lumière brothers’ “views,”¹² because of the story surrounding it; the film, which depicts a train pulling into a station, frightened viewers so badly that they ran from the theater to avoid being hit. There aren’t historical documents to corroborate the veracity of this story,¹³ but there is a truth that we recognize and find plausible. If that anecdote isn’t convincing, what do we tell children when they’re scared by a film? “Don’t worry, it’s not real,” is an expression that comes to mind. We have an inherent belief in images and have to be taught otherwise.

With this inclination to belief in mind, there are two important points to consider. Firstly, realism in film, or any other art form, is never reality; it is an imitation created through artifice. It is a reflection seen through a glass darkly. This becomes important as we translate neorealist ideas to modern documentary filmmaking, because it keeps in perspective where the filmmaker’s obligation to reality, or truth, lies. The second point, borrowing Bazin’s words on the subject, is that “Realism can only occupy in art a dialectical position—it is more a reaction than a truth.” What is the aggregation of these statements? Realism can only exist as an imitation that occupies a dialectical position. Not only can a realist aesthetic be used as an instrument of rhetoric, it is inherently, and unavoidable rhetorical. This is partially because when the significance of a film is derived from the subject themselves—rather than the filmmaking—it becomes an act of selection rather than an act

12 What they termed their one-minute, single-shot short films.

13 Which is interestingly textured as we talk of realism.

of creation. The question becomes, what is the filmmaker choosing to reveal and why? Zavattini, the only person who identified as a neorealist, understood this, and, of his scenarios, said, "I am like a painter standing before a field, who asks himself which blade of grass he should begin with." Zavattini had a theoretical vision for the movement that few others had.¹⁴ Zavattini is recorded as saying that his vision for a full realization of the neorealist movement would be a film showing 90 minutes in the life of a man in which nothing happens. In other words, Zavattini's dream would be documentary, probably a very dull one.

Approaching a Translation:

The hope for this proposal is to employ neorealist theory to outline a method for making more 'filmic' documentaries—documentaries that make greater use of the film form. For this to happen, a two-part translation must occur. First, theory developed for narrative films must be applied to documentaries, and second, it must be updated to a modern context, acknowledging the technological changes and other advances in filmmaking since Zavattini, De Sica, and Bazin. The style derived from this synthesis and translation of ideas will be denoted as narrative realist documentaries for their strict adherence to a realist aesthetic and their reliance on traditional narrative structure.

Subject:

There is no decision that impacts a film more than the choice of its subject. This is especially true here, considering that, if we are successful, the film's thesis will emanate at least partially from the subject. Filmmaker and critic Anderson Cowan has said that, given technical competence, the three elements that elevate a documentary

¹⁴ Including De Sica whose greatest contribution could be seen as faithfully interpreting Zavattini's material.

are subject*,¹⁵ access,¹⁶ and luck.¹⁷ I bring this up to illustrate an important point. While making a documentary in a realist aesthetic, the first two elements become intertwined and the third becomes irrelevant.

Luck no longer matters because high drama is not essential to narrative realist film. Often, it detracts. Consider *Bicycle Thieves*. Bazin calls it “a walk through Rome” which isn’t too reductive. The most dramatic events are Antonio’s bike being stolen or the confrontation between Antonio and the thief’s neighbors. Admittedly, the bicycle being stolen is the *raison d’être* for the entire film, but if the film were a documentary and the theft had not occurred, it would have continued to focus on Antonio’s relationship with the social and economic systems surrounding him. The relationship simply would have looked different.

Subject* and access are intertwined, but it would be better to rephrase and say that subject* is dependent on access. This is a function of having proper footage, amount and variety, to craft a narrative. The filmmaker should approach the project anticipating an extensive time commitment, not unlike that of an imbedded documentarian. In an earlier quote, Zavattini likened his writing to selecting which blade of grass to start with. The filming process is gathering blades of grass, and the filmmaker must make sure that their access allows them to gather sufficient blades to make a field. A film is written three times: in the writing, the filming, and the editing. A talking-head documentary has the benefit of interviews to do their initial writing. A narrative realist documentary does not, so it’s necessary to rely on the filming which brings about the question of coverage.

The Question of Coverage:

15 Here, defined as a subject that will be found engaging or compelling (asterisk to differentiate this definition).

16 The ability to spend large amounts of time with your subject or gain access to an environment or atmosphere that is not universally accessible.

17 A turn of events that could not have been predicted or foreseen that lends itself to a dramatic or engaging narrative. This element could be summed up as ‘right place, right time.’

The first consideration to appear on-screen is how should a subject be shot? Above everything, it is important to film your subject interacting with the system you wish to explore their relationship with. If *Bicycle Thieves* were a documentary, this would mean filming his interactions with the economic system, his work and his struggles to provide financially. These moments, incepted by the significance you're searching for, become the scenes from which you will craft the final film. If the 'when' is chosen correctly, the scenes will contribute to the thesis—a person functioning inside a system—so selection of which to choose becomes a matter of practicality, of forming a narrative with some of the traditional narrative elements: an inciting incident, plot points, and a resolution. This inclination toward traditional narrative is one of the primary ways that narrative realism separates itself from direct cinema. It's also a more practical thing to ask of modern audiences who become bored by "experimental" filmmaking,¹⁸ that is, if they didn't avoid it altogether. Perhaps the beauty of narrative realist documentaries would be that they don't push against the audience's "horizon of expectations" because no single element is unfamiliar. Everything is recognizable from either narrative or documentary films. The only progression is the order in which they've been combined.

As most readers will have anticipated at this point, after the overview of a realist aesthetic, subjects should be shot in a manner that allows them to generate their own significance. Proximity will often be full shots to medium shots. Close-ups are discouraged because of what they inevitably communicate. Another reason for increased distance is to reduce the impact of the camera as events unfold. This is not a school of cinema vérité, so filmmakers are discouraged from participating in or altering events. The beauty of this style of filmmaking is that the manner in which events unfold should have no impact on the thesis—you'll remember Bazin's quote on if Antonio had found his bicycle.

Capture events as they occur with all their objects of significance

18 It's strange that for the last thirty years, the genre of "experimental" films has remained fairly constant. How long before these films are no longer experiments? This is equally true if you prefer the term *avant-garde*.

in-frame. This will mean many static double or triple shots for conversations. Many filmmakers feel a sense of anxiety over this concept, and the solution is to rid your mind of the requirements of psychological editing. This has been the popular, and nearly only, school of editing for narratives for some time, but it's not the only option. The rhythm of shot/reverse-shot is an effective way to shoot a conversation. It creates a visual cadence that doesn't allow the eye to rest (i.e. become bored), but it's also a tool that allows films to become less concerned with their visuals and rely on dialogue. It's an effective crutch that rides that line between enabling and improving. Aaron Sorkin is among the best and wordiest living filmmakers, but what conversational device has become intertwined with his name? The walk and talk. He found a visual way to allow his characters to beautifully run their mouths.¹⁹ Conversations of this length and eloquence won't occur in real life, so it's best to keep conversation and dialogue limited. If you find yourself in the middle of a conversation that stretches but strikes you as important, some camera movement, a reframing, could be in order. This movement shouldn't be self-conscious—which is always evident—but should be thought of as a chance to recontextualize the subjects with their environment. Are they speaking in a factory? Pull back to reveal the work going on around them. Are they on a busy street? Reframe to emphasize the flow of traffic pushing by. Setting is so integral to narrative realist documentaries that even a conversation is rarely just a conversation. The subjects are allowed to generate their own significance, yes, but so is the space around them.

A Note on Interviews:

If this wasn't made abundantly clear, interviews should be excluded. If this is absolutely unavoidable for reasons of exposition and context—and we often need far less of these than we think we do—then the filmmaker has two options that strike me as the best remaining options. The first has the least precedent but is derived from the school of

¹⁹ Watch episode four of season one of *The West Wing* and tell me you aren't floored.

realism pioneered by *Éric Rohmer* in his six moral tales, and this is to conduct a formal interview and use the sounds bites as sparingly and condensed as possible in the form of "voice-over narration." This is the more difficult option and would require interviewing prowess to prompt satisfactory phrasing. I also have concerns over how an audience would receive such a voice over, since this is more associated with narrative films. In documentaries they're often limited to the third-person narration such as in the true-crime genre. This may be confusing or off-putting to an audience—a push for a "horizontal change"—but I find it to be the most satisfactory from a theory standpoint.

The other option is to conduct interviews on location, preferably while the subject is performing a routine action. Returning to a previous example, if they work at a factory, a filmmaker could interview them at their post.²⁰

After mentioning ways interviews might be integrated into narrative realist documentaries, I should reiterate that avoiding them is always preferable. There are other ways to collect expository information without interviewing. It's done in almost every narrative film. Think back to the kinds of scenes where this happens. What tactics do they use? Oftentimes it's something as simple as a character catching up with a friend or family member or explaining something to a stranger. This might not be the most filmic exposition,²¹ but it can be necessary, and both are events that occur in our daily lives, as you break down your day with a roommate, talk with friends or family members on the phone, or explain to a boss why you missed a shift. Exposition is quotidian. A filmmaker doesn't need to orchestrate these moments. He simply needs to be there, and, in all likelihood, it will end up being a more personal and thematically relevant way to impart the information than a self-conscious subject groomed for an interview.

Technically inclined readers are by now bursting with anticipation

20 If your thesis revolves around setting's impact on your subject, then it might be useful to do this at two different locations—such as at the factory working and at home cooking—to juxtapose their body language and tone.

21 Look to something like the opening shot of *Rear Window* for this.

for that side of the discussion. I imagine it will leave them disappointed. There has been a trend in recent years to fetishize camera technology, deifying advances that would be considered negligible by the consuming audience. The neorealist roots of narrative realism push against this mindset. Use what is practical. In this case that would mean use what is mobile and utile. With a realist aesthetic, the quality of your image often isn't the end all, be all. There are many cases of directors working in a school of realism opting for a less polished look,²² but I would urge filmmakers to try to make their film look as polished as possible until they have got the track record to prove a bouncy, grainy footage as a choice.

In summation, use what's available to capture large amounts of the clearest and smoothest footage manageable. This will mean something different to everyone, but the main point is that technology should not be a barrier in this school of filmmaking. A phone can work if used properly as an extension of theory. I apologize to the gearheads I've let down. If you have RED cameras and anamorphic lenses, please use them.²³

Capturing Sound:

Approaching sound should revolve around one central pillar; it should be captured much like it would be on a shoestring, narrative feature. It would be impractical to be followed by a boom operator for an entire shoot, considering the timeframe, mobility requirements, and wanting to minimize levels of intrusion. A person can get used to someone following them around; I'm not sure the same can be said for an entire film crew.

Film theorist C.G. Crisp writes that the elements of filmmaking are only useful insofar as they extend the bounds of film realism. Natural

22 Éric Rohmer chose to shoot *Ma nuit chez Maud* on 35mm film, a step back from the 65mm he shot his breakthrough film, *La Collectionneuse*, on two years earlier. It worked for the restrained narrative. Sean Baker made a similar choice when he shot his film *Tangerine* on three iPhone 5s.

23 Although there might be an argument that at a certain point, resolution and frame rates become hyperreal, and should be actively avoided in narrative realism.

sound is important to the texture of a narrative realist document; it helps to build a complete representation of reality. There's a tendency in modern documentary filmmaking to restrict sound, reduce it to the essential elements. Interviews must be conducted in perfect silence. This doesn't fit narrative realist aspirations. Sound shouldn't be reduced to the essential, but it should all be functional. Robert Bresson, in his book *Notes on the Cinematograph*, says that if there is sound, it must be music. He doesn't mean this in a literal sense. He means that the sounds should be unified in purpose. In this case, the purpose would be to further represent the subject's setting. What is their quotidian music? Is it the sound of competing televisions in their home? Is there a rhythmic clanking at their factory that they are subjected to for hours on end? A filmmaker must develop an ear for this sort of thing.

In the spirit of reducing the amount of equipment needed, a filmmaker should begin with their on-body microphone, or, preferably, upgrade to a high-quality shotgun microphone.²⁴ A shotgun mic alone will get a filmmaker surprisingly far if used effectively, but there's also the question of "dialogue," for which I revert to my earlier statement that sound should be captured like a shoestring, narrative film. Often, it will be most useful to place a lav on your subject, especially when you know an important discussion may take place. This could look many different ways, a meeting with their boss, a family dinner, etc. Another option instead of or in addition to a lav would be to place a field recorder discretely in frame amongst the speakers. Hidden is best, but, if that's not possible, if the screen is busy enough, most viewers won't notice or notice it for what it is.

Additional sound design, if included at all, should be as sparse and naturalistic as possible. Even a score should be thoroughly questioned before being added. Plenty of successful realist films have been made without music. It could be interesting to determine where a filmmaker might find diegetic music in the subject's life to see how this might

24 Filmmakers should prioritize high-quality sound over high-quality images. If the image is of a consistent quality, the eye adjusts rather quickly, while the ear has a more difficult time reconciling with poor sound. Proof of this lies in the microbudget films that have found broad success, narrative and documentary.

factor into the soundscape.

Editing/Writing/Construction/The Story is Revealed:

Editing is two thirds of “writing” a narrative realist documentary. This is where the story is discovered, and editing, or at least planning for the edit, will happen concurrently with filming. The reason for this is that it will give the filmmaker an idea of when to stop the filming process. There will be no abrupt end, unless you reach the death of your subject. Even then, the proceeding events would likely be of interest. In theory, one could spend their life tracking a single subject, crafting a documentary biopic, possibly similar in spirit to Linklater’s *Boyhood*. For most, this is not practical. A narrative realist shoot will already be longer than most; there’s no sense in stretching it to infinity.

Before the cameras can be put away, a filmmaker should have a rough idea of the beats of their story, and this is where I encourage filmmakers to begin seriously considering forming their film to a tradition structure. How can scenes be composed? Where do they start and stop? What transitions from one to the next? What are being presented as the turning points? How can events be presented for and dramatic effect?²⁵ This is where hard drives of footage become a film. It’s also where many ethical questions are raised.

What is the documentarian’s obligation to reality? It’s been established that a realist aesthetic is not a recreation of reality but an artifice that resembles it. Editing is the creation of this artifice, and this is done through its reshaping of time, a conversion from real time to filmic time.²⁶ There’s two parts to this conversion: ordering and

25 The use of the term dramatic effect here, in reference to the ordering of scenes, is derived from the one admitted weakness of the form. Even in a direct rejection of montage theory, one can’t completely avoid the variety of juxtapositions from which the audience derives significance. It has been buffed from the shot-to-shot movement of the film but continues on the scene level. Why has one scene been chosen to follow another when other option surely existed, etc. Aside from in Zavattini’s dream film—90 continuous minutes in the life of a man in which nothing happens—this is inevitable, so it’s best to be aware of the shortcoming.

26 Even in film communities this is often underdiscussed, however it is crucial. Hitchcock described it as: “The ability to shorten or lengthen time is a primary requirement

duration. Ordering should be simple enough. In the film, events should occur in the order in which they occurred. Not a very bold take but an essential one. To take it a step further, information should be revealed as it became known to the subject. Withholding information for the sake of tension is as culpable as reordering events. Inserts such as an establishing shot of a location which functions as a spatial reference that doesn't change over time, could be captured before or after-the-fact in good conscious, but the exceptions are few.

The matter of duration is a more involved discussion and is where real time and filmic time differ tremendously. The questions that's raised is how condensed do events/scenes become—condensed meaning both how long does an event last and how close events are in relation to one another. Both of these, especially the later, will likely be distorted from real time. The aspiration of a realist aesthetic is to limit this distortion. This requires deft handling by the filmmaker. To make an individual scene where real time and filmic time are perfectly equal, there would be no cuts, or, if the filmmaker had a multiple-camera setup, which is unlikely in most cases, it would cut between these perspectives without lost time between. If a narrative were constructed from scenes like this, it would be flooded with unnecessary and redundant information. I'll provide two examples, one visually based and one conversational. If a filmmaker wanted to show the variety of tasks a subject performed over the course of their shift at a factory, to do so in real time would take the duration of an eight-to-ten-hour shift. This scene could also be completed in a thirty second montage. The footage could also be used at interludes between events that happened over the course of the day. The struggle is to find a balance that aspires to and gestures toward real time while respecting the pacing and practical demands of filmic time.

For the next example, in traditional narrative films, a five-minute conversation would be considered long. It would have to be dense with information to justify its existence. Compare this to a five-

in film-making. As you know, there's no relation whatever between real time and filmic time."

minute conversation in the workplace. It's often three or so minutes of empty phrases followed by two minutes of vague importance. Real conversations aren't structured or economical like they are in narrative films. By having a strict adherence to real time in these conversations, a filmmaker will subject their audience to stretches without narrative importance. From a story viewpoint, these are "empty moments," and while they are certainly justified in a theoretical bubble, this bubble ignores the fact that films ultimately exist as the relationship they form with viewers. The purpose of this proposal is to outline a method for making documentaries that are more effective through their marriage of aesthetic and rhetoric, but, ultimately, the first step for a documentary to be effective is to not be turned off within the first ten minutes. Some concessions must be made for the audience. These are determined by the filmmaker's working knowledge of their target audience's "horizon of expectations" and what might be a push for a "horizontal change" too far. Needless to say, this is not an exact science, and it is often the mark of a skilled filmmaker to know how to push without pushing too far.

Case Study 1:

The first case study will look at an existing documentary and reframe how its production would have changed if it were conceived as a narrative realist documentary. For the sake of accessibility, *Free Solo* has been selected, one of the most widely viewed documentaries of recent years and an academy award recipient for Best Documentary Feature. For those who haven't seen the film, *Free Solo* follows rock climber Alex Honnold as he aspires to perform a free solo climb²⁷ of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. It seems presumptuous to claim a film of such critical and popular acclaim would be improved by this method, but it would inarguably have shifted the emphasis.

What makes *Free Solo* an apt selection for a case study is that a good portion of the footage would be suitable for a narrative realist documentary. The filmmakers had intimate access to Alex Honnold.

27 A climb in which the solitary climber doesn't use ropes, harnesses, or other protective equipment.

They were in his van, on his climbs, and along on different press and social events. It seems likely that they could edit a narrative realist film with the footage contained on their hard drives. For the most part, the general structure of the film could be retained, depending, of course, on the chronology of when events were captured. Some scenes may need to be added or removed, especially near the beginning, once the interviews and their easy exposition are expunged. This is where one of the benefits of having Alex Honnold as a subject reveals itself; one quickly gets the sense that he rarely speaks about anything but climbing. If the filmmakers follow him for long enough, they are sure to get the material they need, especially through conversations with other climbers and press events, both being places where exposition of this variety is inevitable.

The climactic sequences of Alex's training and final climb would remain as is. The harrowing footage of Alex inside and around his van, the picture of a man sacrificing himself for his dream, would remain. Many of the pivotal moments between Alex and his girlfriend remain, so what is lost? Some of the scope and history of his accomplishment will vanish with the interviews. Some might argue that this becomes redundant over the course of the film anyway, as they hammer home a made point. Some of Alex's background would also be more difficult to include, along with the more technical aspects of mountain climbing. What is left and what is refined, is an image of Alex and the exploration of his need to overcome El Capitan. In other words, it becomes more concentrated to the present moment. It becomes the story of a man and his relationship to his environment which in this case is rather extraordinary. That is another point to be made, most of the examples to this point have been exceptionally quotidian, but ordinary and extraordinary alike have ways of fitting inside a narrative realist framework.

Case Study 2:

This second case study will function to demonstrate how the concept and framework for a narrative realist documentary might be incepted.

In recent weeks, I've been considering how the inherent problems of economic systems become more pronounced in underdeveloped countries because of how they fit into the global economy. As an extension of this curiosity, I began researching Haiti because it seemed to be the best cross-section of my interests and expertise. Something that struck me as interesting, was the way gender dynamics play into a family's financial outlook, especially if they are poor. In most places, there isn't access to free public education in Haiti—even though this is written into their country's constitution—so lower-class families often have a difficult time affording it. If a family has multiple children, it is common practice to pull one from school so they may work and provide a supplementary income so the other child/children may receive an education. As one, unfortunately, might expect, it is often the girls who are pulled from school so the boys may still attend. What happens later in life is that the uneducated women are unable to find better work than factory jobs, often in the textile industry, with wages they can hardly support themselves on, much less the education of a child, and so the cycle continues.

If a filmmaker was interested in documenting these conditions, and from a rhetorical angle, highlighting the helplessness of these conditions, the first step would be to book a ticket to Haiti, to a place like Delmas in the Port-au-Prince Arrondissement. Needless to say, there's no substitute for this in a narrative realist documentary. Once there, they'll need a subject. It would be helpful to have some leads or even a definitive choice before arrival. As tempting as it might be to turn the camera on an entire community, I'd urge filmmakers to center on a single person, a particularly apt representation of the entire community. For this example, I'd attempt to find a single mother who works in a textile factory and is trying to put a child or children through school in order that they might have better prospects than she herself has. I would want to be able to follow her inside her workplace. This access would play a large role in determining the subject and would require speaking to or negotiating with her employer beforehand. These considerations of access that can't be passed over.

Once this is settled, the filmmaker will be imbedded in the environment for some time, capturing the texture of their subject's life, especially as it pertains to the thesis. Hours and hours of footage will be gathered so it would be helpful—possibly necessary—to take copious notes about what occurred in each day's footage. Seeing this in writing will also help the filmmaker to think of the events as the building blocks for a larger narrative. Occasionally the turning points will be obvious. Perhaps the school requires an addition fee to be paid before the children may return to class.²⁸ The problem becomes more immediate. There's a question or tension that can be resolved, or not, within the bounds of the film; can the mother come up with the money required for her child's education? The rest of the film is an attempt to scrounge together fifteen or twenty dollars for the future of a child over the backdrop of her attaching the price tags onto sixty-dollar Levi jeans. The mountain proves nearly insurmountable. Does this take a toll on the mother or is she used to it? Does she expect this? Either way, the thesis is confirmed. The result is inconsequential. It's the rules of the game that the mother is forced to play that support the film's rhetoric. The rules are set, so revealing them becomes a matter of being present, being technically competent, and being aware of how the events will come together as a narrative.

Conclusion:

Narrative realism proposes a solution to the tendency of documentaries to be excessively literary and not make full use of "filmic expression." Grounded in theory and updated by time, the framework aspires to tell stories of setting and subject, using a realist aesthetic to back a visual rhetoric, an argument made in images. It's not didactic in a conventional sense, that has been stated and can be refuted. Rather, it allows subjects to generate their own significance which gives the "presentation of reality" its irrefutable quality. And to make the rest of the package worth anyone's time, this form of documentary, while progressive,

28 It appears this happens fairly often, for schools to demand miscellaneous payments outside tuition and to refuse the students until they have been paid.

will be immediately understood and received, if not welcomed, by audiences because every progressive quality is recognizable from narrative films. In fact, a narrative realist documentary is at its most successful aesthetically—and therefor rhetorically—when it is visually indistinguishable from narrative films sharing in a realist aesthetic. In this way, it can be seen as an agreement and a culmination of the film form.

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