

Documentary Across Disciplines  
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Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin  
The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, England

## Contents

Introduction: The Documentary Attitude 10

*Erika Balsom, Hila Peleg*

Bruises and Blushes:

Photography “Beyond” Anthropology 20

*Christopher Pinney*

“The Cruel Radiance of What Is” 40

*Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Véréna Paravel,  
and Ben Rivers in Conversation*

“A Cage of Information,” or,  
What is a Biometric Diagram? 80

*Zach Blas*

Interviews in Perspective 1:

The Man with a Tape Recorder 92

*Sylvère Lotringer*

Photography Is Not Served:

“The Family of Man” and The Human Condition 110

*Ariella Azoulay*

“Now that’s Brecht at last!”:

Harun Farocki’s Observational Films 142

*Volker Pantenburg*

Didactic Elegy 164

*Ben Lerner*

Reading Between the Images 172

*Christa Blümlinger*

Montage Against All Odds 192

*Antonia Majaca and Eyal Sivan in Conversation*

No Man’s Land, Every Man’s Home:

Clemens von Wedemeyer’s Documentary Aporia 214

*Evgenia Giannouri*

Interviews in Perspective 2:

Dying Documented 236

*Sylvère Lotringer*

Narrative, “Evidence Vérité,” and the Different  
Truths of the Modern Trial Documentary 252

*Stella Bruzzi*

The Right to One’s Self-Image 280

*Sohrab Mohabbi*

Data Visualization and Documentary’s 294

(In)visible Frontiers

*Kris Fallon*

Introduction: The Documentary Attitude  
*Erika Balsom, Hila Peleg*

In 1936, in the heart of the Great Depression, James Agee and Walker Evans accepted an assignment from *Fortune* magazine to travel through the southern United States and report on the situation of sharecroppers in the midst of the Dust Bowl. The result of this undertaking was not a magazine article, but a book published in 1941, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In the preface, Agee describes the book as a “photographic and verbal record of the daily living and environment of an average white family of tenant farmers,” swiftly yoking together Evans’s images and his own text.<sup>1</sup> Yet in a sharp departure from the established conventions of the photo-essay, the book accords each their own section. Agee’s account is published unillustrated, while Evans’s photographs are offered without direct commentary. From a shared encounter, two distinct means of grappling with reality stand at once together and apart. The book thus stages the productive tensions of thinking documentary across disciplinary boundaries. In a stirring passage, Agee eloquently reflects on the specificity of those technologies and techniques by which we approach actuality:

If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game.

A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.

As it is, though, I’ll do what little I can in writing. Only it will be very little. I’m not capable of it.<sup>2</sup>

Agee writes in spite of the insufficiency of writing. He recognizes the lack of language, the inevitable betrayals it will perpetrate, when faced with the overflowing materiality of the real. He declares the failure and treason of the word with a humility that must be seen as

ethical. And what of photography? It is positioned closer to the real – to those lumps of earth, to the torn piece of flesh – but so close that it risks succumbing to their muteness. Bits of cotton and cloth would fail differently but equally in that they would stop short of offering precise analysis or commentary.

Such is the founding contradiction of documentary, no matter the medium: it remains bound to the real yet it must also always, in the words of Philip Rosen, transform “an undoubtable referential field of pastness into meaning,” and thereby move from document to documentary, taking on the immense weight and responsibility that this entails.<sup>3</sup> Torn between the proximity of the trace and the distance of writing, Agee frames his and Evans’s book as not only a committed account of poverty but also as an inquiry into this process of transformation and its necessary infidelities. He asks how one might most effectively and ethically triangulate reality, meaning, and form – and, of course, what the vexed position of art might be in relation to it all. But he also devotes many of the book’s pages to a performance of the extent to which he cowers when faced with the immensity and intractability of actuality. He is simply not certain that his representation can be just or adequate, and is deeply reflexive about the techniques he marshals to create it.

Hito Steyerl has recently written that “the only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our times is that we always already doubt if it is true.” For her, this uncertainty “is not some shameful lack, which has to be hidden, but instead constitutes the core quality of contemporary documentary modes as such.”<sup>4</sup> This indeed offers a persuasive account of the present, but Agee reminds us that it would be a gross error to retroactively project a bygone era of certainty onto the practices of the past. So too does another foundational moment of documentary studies, John Grierson’s review of Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* (1926), the text the *Oxford English Dictionary* designates as the first usage of the term “documentary” as referring to a filmic or literary work. Despite Grierson’s frequent alignment with a positivist notion of discursive sobriety, this 1926 review represents, in the words of

Jonathan Kahana, “a moment of origin for documentary precisely because it is ambivalent, or simply uncertain, about what the term ‘documentary’ stands for, and about whether its value is in what it shows or how it shows it.”<sup>5</sup> Grierson’s famous definition of documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality” is no less fraught, containing within it the seeming incompatibility of a fidelity to actuality and a license for creativity. Documentary, then, has never ceased to be marked by multiple uncertainties, whether in its relation to reality, its criteria of value, or even in the very parameters of its self-constitution.

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* turns seventy-five this year, and Grierson’s *Moana* review is ninety. And yet their questions remain – or, at least, are once again – our own. In a time of global emergency, contemporary documentary practices reach across media and across disciplines to form a rich site marked by imperatives at once aesthetic and political. Far from any notion of “fly-on-the-wall” immediacy or quasi-scientific aspirations to objectivity, such practices understand documentary not as the neutral picturing of reality, but as a way of coming to terms with reality by means of working with and through images and narrative. And beyond merely representing, reflecting, or helping to comprehend what exists, documentary can produce reality and thus influence beliefs, actions, events, and politics. This book brings together interventions at the vanguard of conceptualizing what documentary is, means, and can do today, while also engaging in the re-evaluation of historical works in light of the contemporary moment. Exploring the many lives of documentary images, texts, and sounds – from the imperialist management of human life to redemptive encounters with the fragility of our world, from professional and disciplinary contexts to personal confrontations with mortality and alterity – it seeks to provide a capacious account of the irrepressible heterogeneity of this vital field of practice. Across anthropology, photography, poetry, cinema, digital media, art, sound recording, and beyond, its contributors consider the fertile and contested intersections of reality and representation.

In 1998, Lucien Castaing-Taylor wrote of the “fragile future of documentary [...] in this age of spectacle and simulation,” citing the need for a reinvigoration and revitalization of this field of practice.<sup>6</sup> Documentary was under a double threat: first, from the spurious reality-effects of mass media, which were stronger than ever, and second, from theoretical tendencies that argued for the diminished importance of the referential dimension of the image. The methodological approaches of poststructuralist postmodernism, indebted as they were to Saussurean semiotics, left little space for a consideration of the referent and frequently subjected images to reductive linguistic models of interpretation, understanding them as conventional signs rather than as traces of reality. For Jean Baudrillard in particular, questions of the real and the referent were hopelessly anachronistic in an age of simulated reality-effects. Within such a climate, documentary was something of a bad object, presumed to be inextricable from naïve and ideological notions of immediacy, transparency, and authenticity. One response to the acknowledgment that all images are the product of codes and conventions is to deem the documentary image and the fictional image interchangeable on the grounds that they are equally constructed. While tempting, to take up such a position is to woefully relinquish the unique demands that documentary images place on their viewers. It was against this doxa that Serge Daney argued in his 1992 text “The Tracking Shot in *Kapo*”:

There always comes a moment when you have to pay your debt to the cash-box of sincere belief and *dare to believe in what you see*. [...] There has to be some risk and some virtue, that is, some value, in the act of showing something to someone who is capable of seeing it. Learning how to “read” the visual and “decode” messages would be useless if there wasn’t still the minimal, but deep-seated, conviction that *seeing* is superior to not seeing, and that what isn’t seen “in time” will never really be seen.<sup>7</sup>

Today, though spectacle and simulation continue unabated, it does seem that Daney’s dare has been taken up: documentary’s future no longer appears fragile at all following a shift in sensibility on the part of those who seek to engage in a sphere of representation beyond – and indeed, in opposition to – mass media. Twenty-first-century art, film, and theory bear witness to a heightened desire to dare to believe in those images that demand it.

For some, the events of September 11, 2001 serve as an important periodizing marker of this changed cultural logic, a date after which the intractable real would make itself felt even through the most highly mediated forms of experience: in televised visions of collapsing towers, digital photographs of theatrical scenes of torture, and the operational images of drone strikes. Undoubtedly, though, the limitations of postmodern simulation began to become clear even earlier, as Daney’s text suggests. The wager of daring to believe in what one sees is recognized not as a futile or ideologically mystified act but in fact as ever more necessary in an age of Photoshop, reality television, and US presidential aides who proclaim, “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.”<sup>8</sup> The new century has seen a concerted move beyond the textualist model of the image and the precession of simulacra, often out of ethical and political motivation. In place of postmodernism’s delight in the rubble of signifiers, today one senses a renewed interest in thinking the relationship between reality and aesthetic form. There is a palpable need to attend to actuality and interrogate the processes by which we transform lived experience into meaning through representational practices while, at the same time, never relinquishing the necessary critique of objectivity and transparency.

In contemporary art and cinema, this interest in documentary came in the wake of trenchant critiques of Eurocentrism and the concomitant embrace of postcolonialist methodologies of recovery and revision. Artists turned away from the materialist interrogation of the medium, away from the “forest of signs,” and toward the world. Working across media, but particularly in photography

and the moving image, they began to take up increasingly global perspectives on the precariousness of human and non-human life and to engage in non-traditional forms of historiography. Whereas many artists' moving image practices of the 1990s were concerned with the image-repertoire of classical Hollywood cinema, this gradually gave way to heightened interest in the invention of hybrid docufiction forms and to the adoption of essayistic, ethnographic, archival, and observational strategies that extend the traditions of documentary cinema in a new institutional context and an expanded field of aesthetic possibilities. Figures long associated with this tradition, such as Harun Farocki and Chris Marker, began to increasingly move into the gallery, while a series of major exhibitions and film festivals brought the spheres of art and documentary into a new coalition.<sup>9</sup> With careful attention to the specificity of located experience, the fields of film and art have recently been replete with practices that continue and contest cinema's long documentary tradition in light of today's social, geopolitical, and technological conditions.

The advent of digital technologies of image production, manipulation, and circulation has been central to this impulse. For documentary, digitization figures simultaneously as threat and promise: it is a form of derealization against which documentary must assert itself, and yet it offers new tools for the creation and distribution of nonfiction images, revitalizing this field of practice. Computer-generated animations with no tie to reality have increasingly usurped the lens-based images of film and video, while the digital image – open to granular, potentially invisible control down to the last pixel – is haunted by a specter of manipulation, prompting a crisis of faith in its authenticity. And yet, digital technologies have also proved a tremendous resource. Just as, in the 1960s, the invention of lightweight cameras able to record synchronized sound revolutionized the theory and practice of documentary, developments in digital video technology have made possible new approaches to reality in all its excess. One sees evidence of this in a film like Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V  rina Paravel's *Leviathan*

(2012), shot with tiny GoPro cameras able to be strapped to laboring bodies as easily as they can be thrown into the ocean, or CAMP's *From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf* (2009–13), which compiles multiple video formats – including images shot on mobile phones – to document sailors voyaging from the Gulf of Kutch in India to the United Arab Emirates. While such practices relinquish a degree of control and give rein to the unruly spontaneity of reality, the ascendance of digital technologies of documentation has equally made possible moves in the opposite direction, offering new techniques for the organization, management, and even policing of the material world. Metadata inscribes images with information concerning the date, location, and means of their production, offering a supplementary, non-visual documentary resource that has forever transformed how and what we learn from photographs. Whether in the spurious neutrality of hegemonic forms of data visualization, the world picture of Google Maps, or the implementation of biometric means of quantitatively documenting the human body, practices of digital capture extend across a vast and varied terrain, creating a grid of enforced visibility within and against which critical documentary practices must operate.

*Documentary Across Disciplines* emerges from the Berlin Documentary Forum, a program for the production and presentation of contemporary and historical documentary practices in an interdisciplinary context, produced biannually between 2010 and 2014 by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, under the artistic direction of Hila Peleg. While this book by no means compiles the proceedings of the three editions of this event, it builds upon its innovative, cross-disciplinary methodology and its rich set of participants and ideas. The Berlin Documentary Forum was conceived as a way of taking stock of the diversity and vibrancy of contemporary practices, while also providing historical contextualization for them. Too often, recent discussions posit a supposed age of “conventional” cinematic documentary – beset by an unreconstructed belief in objectivity – and use it as a straw man against which the

creativity and reflexivity of contemporary artistic practices may be favorably compared, thus neglecting to consider the extent to which the documentary tradition has always been one of uncertainty, contamination, and contestation. Documentary didn't need artists to teach it creativity and reflexivity, yet its predominance in contemporary art is undeniable and demands examination. By revisiting an expansive documentary tradition and serving as a venue for new work, the Berlin Documentary Forum offered a corrective to this historical myopia and diffused the claims of novelty that sometimes accompany documentary in an art context, while also providing an opportunity to illuminate the specificity of the present. This anthology takes up this methodology, with contributions that discuss material spanning from the immediate postwar period to today, some situated very close to the artistic and cinematic contexts and others far outside it.

Rather than taking for granted how one might define “documentary” or attempting to legislate what would constitute correct or incorrect deployments of this slippery term, the program of the Berlin Documentary Forum critically engaged with a diverse array of practices spanning the domains of film, photography, contemporary art, anthropology, performance, architecture, cultural history, and theory. Though these contributions were varied in discipline, strategy, and medium, what united them was a shared investment in orchestrating urgent encounters with actuality and finding in this undertaking a generative and meaningful resource for cultural production. This book follows the Berlin Documentary Forum in this regard as well, as it looks to documentary not as a category or genre – not as a label that one might bestow on one particular practice and refuse another – but as a critical method. Above all, documentary emerges as an attitude – a way of doing, engaging, and creating that accords primacy to the multiple and mutable realities of our world.

- 1 James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. London: Penguin, 2006, p. xvii.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 10–11.
- 3 Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. 240.
- 4 Hito Steyerl, “Documentary Uncertainty,” *Re-visiones*, vol. 1, (2001), <http://re-visiones.net/spip.php?article37>.
- 5 Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 7.
- 6 Lucien Castaing-Taylor, “Introduction,” David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, ed. Lucien Castaing-Taylor. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 3.
- 7 Serge Daney, “The Tracking Shot in *Kapo*,” *Postcards from the Cinema*, trans. Paul Grant. Oxford: Berg, 2007, p. 31. Emphasis in original.
- 8 In 2004, the *New York Times* reported that an anonymous presidential aide – later identified as Karl Rove – chided journalist Ron Suskind for his participation in the outmoded “reality-based community,” which he defined as populated by those who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” Now, Rove claimed, “we [the United States government] create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities.” Ron Suskind, “Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004, [www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html).
- 9 *documenta 10* (1997), curated by Catherine David, might be taken as the inaugurator of a series of interventions that together constitute a “documentary turn” in contemporary art and cinema. A partial listing of

key moments in this “turn” includes but is not limited to: *documenta 11* (2002), curated by Okwui Enwezor; the CPH:DOX film festival (2003–) in Copenhagen; the FID Marseille film festival under the direction of Jean-Pierre Rehm (2002–); the True/False Film Festival in Columbus, Missouri (2003–); *Experiments with Truth* (2004), curated by Mark Nash at Fabric Museum and Workshop, Philadelphia; *The Way of the Termite: The Essay in Cinema, 1909–2004* (2007), programmed by Jean-Pierre Gorin at the Austrian Film Museum, Vienna; *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (2008), curated by Okwui Enwezor at the International Center of Photography, New York; *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, curated by Maria Lind at the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annanale-on-Hudson, New York, as well as its accompanying research group (2008); the *Art of the Real* showcase at the Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York (2014–), programmed by Dennis Lim and Rachael Rakes; and of, course, the three editions of Berlin Documentary Forum (2010–14) curated by Hila Peleg at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, out of which this book arises.