

# The Camera Never Dreams:

An essay towards *Sunless (Sans Soleil)*

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On July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1839 François Arago stood in the Chamber of Deputies, France, in order to persuade the French government to purchase Louis Daguerre's patents for the revolutionary Daguerreotype photographic process. In his arguments, Arago was keen to emphasise the scientific applications of the apparatus. "The camera was to join, as Arago listed them, 'the thermometer, barometer, hygrometer', and the telescope and microscope" <sup>(1)</sup>. The government were persuaded and bought the patents. Arago's stance at the founding moment of photography was one that widely persists today: the camera is to be considered as being fundamentally an instrument of science, not of art. Before anyone had even conceived the notion of documentary photography, the seeds of a conflict had been planted.

By the 1870s cameras and printing presses were being used to disseminate and to discover scientific knowledge that could not be attained any other way. Pioneering motion studies, such as Eadweard Muybridge's Palo Alto horse sequences were sealing the reputation of the camera as an instrument that operated without inflection. The photograph was thought to be the visual analogue of the written factual record ("the camera never lies"). However John Taylor observes in his examination of 1930s documentary realism that this is a common misconception. "Representation is always problematic, no less in photography than in language, film, sculpture or painting. And the fundamental quality of any representation is that it is *constructed*." <sup>(2)</sup>

Despite this conflict, the perception of photography as factual record persisted into and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reinforced by the insurmountable influence of the newspaper and photo-journalism. In addition to the technical restraints the printing press imposed on reportage photography, the newspaper editor imposed many formal restraints on the medium to pander to the public's pre-conception of what an accurate observation was. Taylor notes: "novelty in lighting, ambiguity in space, or an attempt to strike a mood were not dominant characteristics of the newspaper photograph." <sup>(3)</sup> The camera's ability to provide sharp images of events had become its limiting factor. People considered a sufficiently in-focus photograph to be an accurate factual record of the event, as if 'the truth' was inherent in the clarity of the image. Accepted without question by the public, photographs became "the yardstick by which the printed word was measured as 'accurate' or 'emotional'." <sup>(4)</sup> The further the written word moved from the reality portrayed in an accompanying photograph, the more subjective and the less accurate the written word was considered.

There are valuable exceptions to this rule, such as Robert Capa's photographs of the D-Day landings, June 1944, taken when he joined the first wave of troops to land on the Normandy beaches. His photographs are often printed accompanied by a personal written account of the experience from Capa:

*"I didn't dare to take my eyes off the finder of my Contax and frantically shot frame after frame. Half a minute later, my camera jammed – my roll was finished. I reached in my bag for a new roll, and my wet, shaking hands ruined the roll before I could insert it in the camera."* <sup>(5)</sup>

Capa's account is subjective and emotional, yet his images do not lessen the perceived accuracy of his words. His visually striking photographs of the landing - smeared, grainy and slightly out of focus - actually validate the drama of his written account. Famously, when his film rolls were received for developing at the London press office an over-zealous darkroom technician turned the heat too high in the dryer and melted the emulsions. Out of 106 pictures, only 8 were salvaged <sup>(6)</sup> and even these were badly damaged. The damage makes the images even more startling: the smear of the action is enhanced, the detail lost, and the pattern of the sprocket holes on the negative has spilled visibly into the frame. One of the 8 salvaged pictures made the cover of TIME magazine. The pictures are uniquely interesting among contemporary reportage photography because they acknowledge the possibility of subjective reality in the photographic record. Capa's photographs could not claim to be 'the truth' in the accepted sense but they could claim to be 'a truth' - they were true to his experience.

This illustrates a conflict in representation that is ongoing today. On one side, the belief that reality is totally subjective, that every representation is constructed and interpreted. On the other side is the belief that the only problem reality poses is "to go and look and see what *things* there *are*" <sup>(7)</sup>. By the 1960s the horizons of documentary filmmaking were about to be significantly widened, and the documentary film drawn to the centre of the conflict. Richard Leacock, a documentary filmmaker and soon to be key figure, had talked about the "idea of photographing events as they occurred" <sup>(8)</sup> and his ideas were about to be realised.

In the early 1960s the Eclair hand-held camera and the Nagra sound recorder appeared, making portable, independent, sync recording possible for the first time in the history of cinema. These technical advances allowed a revolution in documentary filmmaking practices to take place, and filmmakers made uncompromising claims for the technology. They believed they were finally able to “make good on documentary film’s promise to show ‘actuality’ on screen.”<sup>(9)</sup> Almost immediately the filmmakers deployed the new technology to this end, developing new ethics of ‘non-intervention’ to chase the elusive ideals of objectivity and of the film as evidence. So the *cinéma-vérité* or *direct cinema* movement was formed. Leacock and Al Maysles made the groundbreaking documentary, *Primary*, and other films followed soon afterwards. The *vérité* filmmakers talked of capturing events and of creating a ‘window on the world’. It was a purely observational mode of documentary. 120 years after François Arago had first claimed the camera in the name of science, the *vérité* filmmakers were reasserting that claim. Their attitude, argues Brian Winston, was that the camera was “an instrument of scientific inscription producing evidence objective enough to be ‘judged’ by a spectator.”<sup>(10)</sup>

However, many of the conventions of *cinéma-vérité* can be easily recognised - despite its attempts to hide the processes of its creation, they still exist. “The long takes, the lack of commentary, absence of cinematic lighting, and the persistent use of black and white stock long after the television news had switched to colour”<sup>(11)</sup> had all become stylistic nuances used to pander to the *cinéma-vérité* audience’s newly formed pre-conceptions of what actuality should look like. Capa’s famous D-Day photographs had altered the public perception of how reportage photography should look, and in due course the new look became convention: “cinematographers were noting that the authenticity of war footage was becoming connected in the audience’s minds with shaky black and white shots”<sup>(12)</sup>. In the 1960s Jean-Luc Godard proved that audiences were making similar associations with *cinéma-vérité* techniques when he used the same techniques to bring a sense of immediacy and authenticity to his fiction films. Even if, as claimed, the purely observational documentary could be achieved using the new technology (it could not) it still would not attain the status of a factual record of events. Non-interventionism is no guarantor of factual accuracy because the act of observation is subjective. As Colin MacCabe rightly insists, “There is no neutral place from which we can see... the scene ‘as it really is’.”<sup>(13)</sup>

Many critics have concluded that the conventional modes of representation are reliant on a passive audience willing to accept the filmmaker's portrayal of reality without question. The claim of observational documentary that the indisputable truth could be captured in the recorded image implied that “all one has to do is contemplate and texts will deliver up their meaning.”<sup>(14)</sup> In response to this claim some critics of observational documentary argued for “difficult art, an art that forces its audience into an active interpretive response.”<sup>(15)</sup> According to Bill Nichols “many filmmakers with a desire to address the conventions of representation have taken up the reflexive mode [of documentary] in order to challenge the impression of reality that the other modes convey.”<sup>(16)</sup> Chris Marker is one such filmmaker. With Jean-Luc Godard, he was once a member of the Dziga Vertov Group of filmmakers. Marker's work is self-reflexive and challenging even for a film-literate audience, displaying interests akin to Vertov in the precise and overt manipulation of the medium to control the audience's perception and interpretation of it. Marker's desire to share with his audience an understanding of the complexity of representation is a defining characteristic of his film, *Sunless*.

In his analysis of *Sunless*, Jon Kear observes that “for Marker, it is an ethical imperative of representation that it declare its means.”<sup>(17)</sup> From the first sequence this is at work. We watch serene silent footage of three children walking in an Icelandic landscape, which has the “artless simplicity and intimacy”<sup>(18)</sup> of a home movie, after which a length of black leader runs. “He said that it was the image of happiness, and also that he had tried several times to link it to other images, but it never worked” says the narrator, as the black leader is interrupted by acquired footage of an American war plane descending into an aircraft carrier, creating a skilfully constructed association (contrary to the narrator's assertion) between the innocence of childhood and the horror of war that entirely alters our perception of the images. The narrator continues “If they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black.” Of course, Marker knows that we *perceive* a lot more than that.

Throughout *Sunless* Marker is openly searching for a form of representation that approximates human consciousness. He uses various recurring icons and themes throughout *Sunless* – animals, cultural nuance, history/memory – as the subject matter for his film experiment. Each time a theme is revisited, our perception of it is altered as we infer new meaning from the ever-changing context of everything that has come before. The film considers history/memory to be in a constant state of transformation;

history repeats itself as the past echoes into the future and distant events touch in the spiral of time. Marker employs montage extensively, constructing complex sequences that allude to our remembering and forgetting, using association and dissociation of images to mimic the scattered nature of our memory recall. *Sunless* overwhelms the viewer with its rapid and dislocated editing style and the narration hypnotises with its philosophical postcards from this dreamscape. Is the camera filming the tangle of the traveller's thoughts and memories, or the narrator's, or is the camera itself dreaming? At one point the narrator describes an idea the traveller has had for a future project to be called *Sunless*, implying that Marker considers this film only one of many possible solutions to this representational puzzle. The most radical of the film's experiments in representation, "the Zone", is interesting when considered in this context.

The Zone is a process of electronically transforming images into an abstract and barely recognisable form, intended to reveal to us the unsatisfactory nature of all forms of representation. Through the Zone, Marker shows us transformed archive images, television pictures, and previous images from *Sunless*. Of the transformed television images, the narrator comments that after transformation they are more truthful: "at least they [now] proclaim themselves to be what they are: images, not the portable and compact form of an already inaccessible reality." The presence of images from *Sunless* in the Zone is a reminder that they too are no more or less constructed and interpreted than any form of representation.

As filmmaking moves into the digital age, the relevance of Marker's argument becomes ever more apparent. The zone's crude transformations may be obvious to us, but it is the process that is significant. With modern digital technology, an image can be subtly or radically altered without leaving any obvious artefacts of the process. Brian Winston claims "digitalisation destroys the photographic image as evidence of anything except the process of digitalisation."<sup>(20)</sup> The implications of this statement are troubling: if the digital image is untrustworthy as a document of anything but its own creation, the observational mode of documentary cannot exist in the digital age, and the position of the self-reflexive mode becomes one of complete scepticism. However observational documentary makers have embraced small lightweight digital camcorders as an advance towards the ideal of non-interventionism. If digitalisation is not destroying observational documentary, then the issue of realism is more complex than *cinéma-vérité's* filmmakers and critics would have us believe.

The danger of the self-reflexive mode of documentary, a danger very apparent in *Sunless*, is that it “closes in on itself... [and] becomes a loop which effaces social analysis” <sup>(21)</sup> as it seeks to challenge the observational mode, and in so doing becomes hopelessly entangled in the search for alternative forms of truth in representation that are equally elusive.

Dana Polan has argued for a revised approach to conventional theories of representation in order to avoid these pitfalls. She approaches representation not as a process of controlling a submissive audience, but as a contract in which the audience “willingly agrees to relate to codes in a certain way.” <sup>(22)</sup> Within the structure of a contract we can see audiences’ changing perceptions of what constitutes realism and truth as a natural process, an ever-evolving language of codes. Each new technique that the filmmaker deploys only temporarily attains new heights of realism in the minds of an audience, until the language evolves again.

Within this structure the theory of realism as being ‘contained’ in the image must be set aside. The filmmaker manipulates the audience’s perception of realism by using the mutually understood and agreed-upon language of code and convention. Self-reflexivity becomes an invaluable tool for filmmakers to make audiences aware of the language, and so ensure its continued evolution. Photography’s claim to the ideal of the factual record may finally be destroyed by the coming of the digital age, but the debate on realism will continue as long as there are filmmakers and audiences.

*Notes*

1. Brian Winston, Claiming The Real, British Film Institute, London, 1995, p. 127.
2. John Taylor, 'Picturing the Past – Documentary Realism in the 1930s' in Ten-8, issue no. 11, p. 18.
3. Ibid, p. 19.
4. Ibid, p. 17.
5. Robert Capa, Images of War, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Hamlyn, London, 1964, p. 109.
6. Ibid, p. 110.
7. Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian theses' in Screen, issue no. 15, 1974, p. 12.
8. Winston, p. 146.
9. Ibid, p. 148.
10. Ibid, p. 151.
11. Ibid, p. 162.
12. Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery, Film History: Theory and Practice, Knopf, New York, 1985, p. 221.
13. MacCabe, p. 15.
14. Dana B. Polan, 'Brecht and the Politics of Self-Reflexive Cinema' in Jump Cut, issue no. 17, p. 29.
15. Ibid, p. 29.
16. Bill Nichols, Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1991, pp. 32-33.
17. Jon Kear, Cinetek Series: Sunless, Flick Books, New York, 1999, p. 30.
18. Ibid, p. 12.
19. Ibid, p. 39.
20. Winston, p. 259.
21. Polan, p. 30.
22. Ibid, p. 30.