

Who is speaking, of whom, to whom? The Case of Documentary Film

What I see is life looking at me
I am looking through a circle in a circle of looks.
(Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Reassemblage*)

“Who is speaking?”

“I do not intend to speak about/ Just speak near by”. At the outset of *Reassemblage*, an extremely poetic film produced in 1982 by Vietnamese American director Trinh T. Minh-ha, a whispering voice-over makes this statement of intents, which has become a sort of ethical as well as aesthetical imperative for everybody wanting to engage with the representation of ‘the Other’, either in film, literature or criticism. Later in the film, this statement comes up again in a fragmented and re-assembled form, like an echo, a trace, a blurred memory: “Speak about/ K-about”.¹ Even if the film were tempted into speaking ‘about’, it could not. Its voice falters, breaks, stops.

Reassemblage is a superb example of ‘speaking near by’ a living community without trying to give it a voice. It is also a sophisticated piece of film criticism, which questions documentary form and its devices, especially those evidently in tension with techniques of observation originated in ethnographic milieus (such as questionnaires, interviews and participant observation). Filmed in Senegal (“A film about what? My friends ask,/ A film about Senegal; but what in Senegal?”, the voice-over keeps asking), it juxtaposes discrete moments of everyday life in a local village and segments of encounters between western observers and local people: a Peace-Corps Volunteer, a woman gynaecologist, a well intentioned ethnologist who “defines himself as a person who stays long, long enough, in a village to study the culture of an ethnic group”. The ethnologist tries to make his presence as unobtrusive as possible, in order not to modify the authenticity of the reality he wants to study. But the voice-over comments are ironical: “What can we expect from ethnology?”, or “He thinks he excludes personal values. He tries or believes so but how can he be a Fulani? That’s objectivity”.² The rhythm of the film is punctuated with pauses and silences, which structure with their breathing pulse the re-assemblage of segments of ‘authentic’ conversations and performances by the local people, comments and reflections by the voice-over, repetitions, suspensions, variations and resonances, to use a term and a notion which is central to Trinh T. Minh-ha’s effort “to resist diverse forms of centralisation – the indulgence in a unitary self, in a locus of authority”.³

¹ From the script of *Reassemblage*, in Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 96 and 103.

² Ibid., 98 and 103.

³ Trinh T. Minh-ha in conversation with Annamaria Morelli, “The Undone Interval”, in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti eds., *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 3-16.

Like *Reassemblage*, a number of other films by the same director can be regarded as essay-films, which revisit the ethnographically inspired documentary film form, unsettling the question of ethnographic representation. In conversation with her, in 1989, British black director Isaac Julien commented on her challenging way of positioning her subjects in the fictionalized interviews, which constitute *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*:

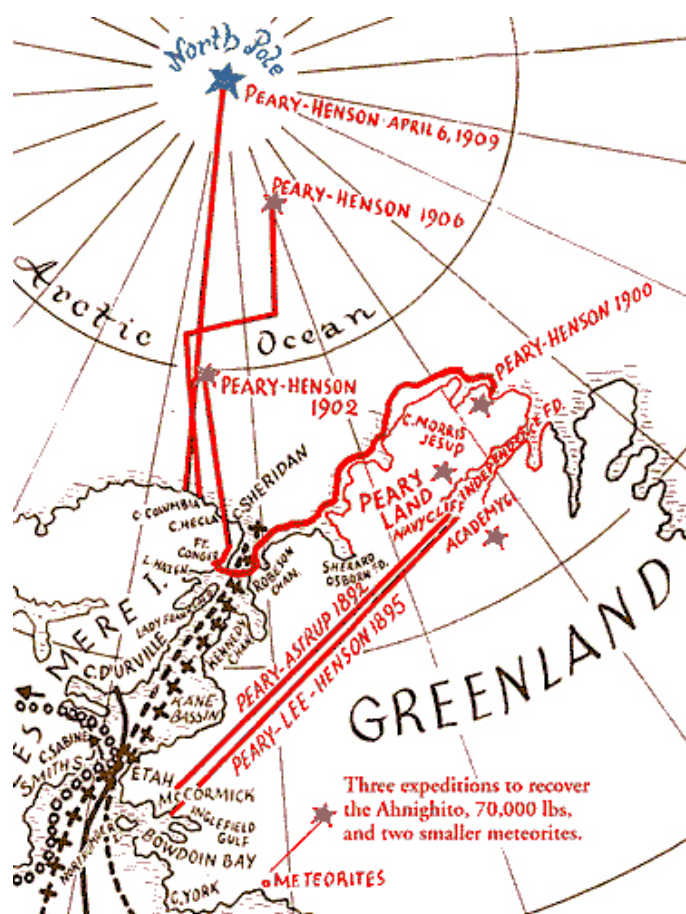
Then there is ... what I would call the burden of representation – making films about subjects that have not been given voice – that you face in relationship to trying to give that subject in some way its own voice without it being the “authentic” voice. In your film I felt these tensions. I avoided it because I didn’t interview anybody, really. That was my way of dealing with it. But I know that to a certain extent that didn’t work as well. I thought that your attempt was a brave one.⁴

Julien was obviously referring to the highly sophisticated technique used by Trinh T. Minh-ha in *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* where the experiences and feelings of the women represented as voiceless are rendered by means of interviews, which are far from being simply ‘authentic’, since they are rehearsed by actresses who follow a script derived from ‘true’ interviews. In his own films, Julien entertains critical dialogue with the classic documentary form and often plays a sort of hide-and-seek game with the subject matter and intentions of the genre. In so doing, he explodes any pretence of ‘scientific’ objectivity and any aspiration to speak from an impersonal, central (implicitly Eurocentric) view-point. He offers instead what he would, and has, in fact, defined “experiments with truth”.⁵ A case in point is his 2005 *True North*, a filmic rewriting of pioneering North Pole exploration narratives. The title gestures playfully towards the cartographical polemics about the identification of the ‘true’ magnetic North Pole, which accompanied the twentieth century’s rival expeditions.

It also challenges the official representation of the Man vs Nature fight in prohibitive conditions from the very choice of its title, with its ironic play on scientific terminology and its canonical reference to a classic of documentarism: Robert

⁴ Trinh T. Minh-ha, “‘Who Is Speaking?’ Of Nation, Community and First Person Interviews”, an interview with Isaac Julien and Laura Mulvey, in *Framer Framed*, 193.

⁵ See, among other texts, Mark Nash and Isaac Julien, “Experiments with Truth”, in Anna Maria Cimitile, Serena Guarracino and Marina Vitale, eds., *Sfida e Passione. Dagli studi culturali agli studi delle donne. Dedicato a Lidia Curti*, DVD for private circulation (Naples: Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”, 2007).



Towards the making of *True North*. Mapping the ‘true’ conquest of the North Pole. Courtesy of Isaac Julien.

⁶ For a very interesting discussion of the aesthetics of the film with its double-edged appropriation of such categories as the Sublime, see Lisa Bloom, “*True North*. Isaac Julien’s Aesthetic Wager”, in the critically illuminating Catalogue of one of Julien’s exhibitions held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami and Mak Center for Art and Architecture (Los Angeles: *Isaac Julien/True North*, 2005-2006).

Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*.⁶ Julien’s film also displaces the Western-European celebration of discovery and heroism, by reintroducing the complexities of gender and ethnicity. In particular, by introducing a female black protagonist, the film reinstates, with a strong note of gender criticism, the fundamental contribution of both the Inuits and African-American explorer Matthew Henson to Peary’s expedition to the North Pole; a contribution systematically obscured by official records.



Matthew Henson at the time of his expedition with Peary to the North Pole. Courtesy of Isaac Julien.



Redressing ethnic and gender clichés: Vanessa Myrie as Henson in *True North*. Courtesy of Isaac Julien.

⁷ For an important discussion of her post-colonial revisitations of western cinema, see her conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha in *Framer Framed*, 243-247.

⁸ Ibid., 245.

⁹ I’m borrowing the hendiadys from the title of Trinh T. Minh-ha’s 1992 book quoted above.

Similarly critical appropriations of the classic documentary-ethnographic style of representation can be found in Laleen Jayamanne’s films: she aptly titled *A Song of Ceylon* her 1985 film, which reappropriated, with a difference, Basil Wright’s *Song of Ceylon*.⁷ She herself half-jokingly calls her film “a postcolonial dance film”, or “an ethnographic film of the body”.⁸ Her work, like those of Isaac Julien and Trinh T. Minh-ha, poses questions which are left open. No definitive answers are offered. No truths are achieved or looked for. The only thing one is assured of is that these films do not give voice to the Other, but lend their ears to others. Their dialogue is not only with women, men and children engaged in a complex play of resonances with the film-makers, who are themselves always in an inside/out-side position, framers/framed.⁹ Their dialogue is also with the epistemological tenets of anthropology and ethnology, with their methods of documentation, classification and archiving, as well as with the technical devices and aesthetics of documentary film as a genre.

In order better to understand this ongoing dialogue, this paper will discuss some of the features of the classic documentary cinema of the early twentieth century.

“By the people, for the people, and about the people”

The 1930s were the heyday of realism as an aesthetic value both in literature and in the visual arts, in Great Britain as much as elsewhere. It was a period of sharp political polarization in the artistic domain, no less than in society at large. Progressive intellectuals put a high prize on the ideological and political aspects of aesthetical production and sometimes went so far as to hypostasize the instrumentality of art to the reasons of politics, and to proclaim the pre-eminency of social ends upon artistic means. Especially in Marxist and pro-proletarian milieus, art was charged with the moral imperative to hold a mirror up to Reality (almost invariably thought of with a capital R) and catch therein the unbiased reflection of Truth (again, with a capital T). It was assumed that, in order to pursue this goal, authors had to obliterate their own presence as much as possible from the scene of representation, and act as a sort of recording apparatus, as a camera ‘objective’. “I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking”, was the incipit of Christopher Isherwood’s Berlin diary *Goodbye to Berlin*, and an accurate description of the creative practice which was most appreciated in those circles.¹⁰ From the pages of a special issue of *Fact* devoted to “Writing in Revolt. Theory and Practice”, Storm Jameson used a similar photographic metaphor, possibly unaware of the inner contradiction she was highlighting between the impersonality of the camera eye taking a picture, and the intentionality of the photographer choosing its angle:

No commentary – the document is a comment. No aesthetic, moral, or philosophical enquiry – that is none which is not implicit [...] our criticism of values is implied in the angle from which we take our pictures. By choosing this detail, this word, rather than another from the mass offered to us, we make our criticism, our moral judgements.¹¹

The aesthetics of the ‘Real’, which Isherwood and the other practitioners and theorists of the 1930s documentary movement had come to elaborate, was in full agreement with the principles of Socialist Realism. Documentarists were convinced that it was necessary to give visibility to the dramatic social problems of their times and believed that nobody could express such problems better than the people who actually ‘experienced’ them. Uppermost among their aims was the effort to give the so far economically and culturally deprived classes a chance to find their own voice. Documentary art – which was seen at the time as coextensive with ‘proletarian’ art – was purported to

¹⁰ Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (London: Hogarth, 1939), 7. Bob Fosses’ 1972 film *Cabaret* was based on Isherwood’s book, via Henry Cornelius’ 1955 half-ironically titled film *I am a Camera*.

¹¹ Storm Jameson, “Documents”, *Fact*, IV (July 1937), 16.

¹² William Empson, "Proletarian Literature", *Scrutiny*, III, 4 (March 1935), 333-338. The question has been recently revisited by the exhibition devoted to *Making History: Art and Documentary in Britain from 1929 to Now*, held at the Tate Liverpool – 3 February-23 April 2006 – and presented by Tanya Barson, Lynda Morris, Mark Nash and David Campany in the catalogue of the same title (London: Tate, 2006).

¹³ An embattled debate was waged on this issue among politically engaged intellectuals especially on the pages of such militant reviews as *The Left Review* and *Scrutiny*. I have discussed these matters in *Le voci di Calibano. Documentarismo e letteratura proletaria nell'Inghilterra degli anni Trenta* (Napoli: I.U.O., 1988) and *L'altra Inghilterra. Luoghi e stili della scrittura proletaria inglese degli anni Trenta* (Napoli: ESI, 1993).

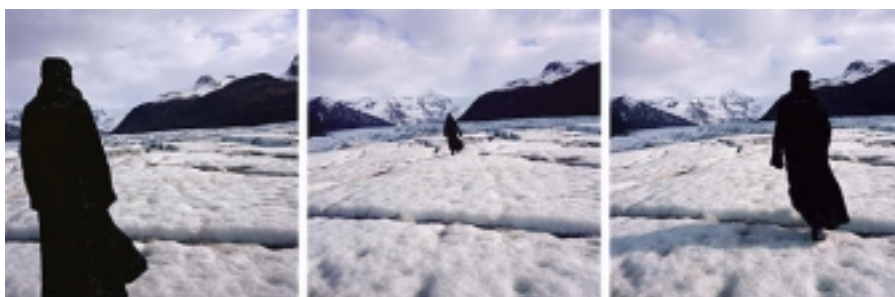
¹⁴ London described the disguises he chose for the eighty five days he lived in the East End of London while preparing *The People of the Abyss* (New York: Macmillan, 1903); Orwell adopted similar devices while collecting documentary material for his *In and Out in Paris and London* (London: Gollancz, 1933) and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Gollancz, 1937).

be "By the people, for the people and about the people", as was notoriously stated by William Empson.¹²

But, as Empson himself and the other pro-proletarian intellectuals of the time knew very well, what they could actually hope for was to speak 'about' and 'for' the people, while the remaining condition they expected of a proletarian art – to be 'by' the people – was very hard to be brought into existence before the advent of the much fantasized revolution, and the constitution of a classless society.¹³ What actually happened, therefore, was that they strove to produce a sort of 'pastoral' (again in Empson's terms) exhibiting an effect of 'proletarian'. One of the main devices to reach this illusionist aim was to conceal the origin of representation as much as possible, by acting as if the documentarist's eye were not there at all, and implying that the subject under observation was in a position to produce its own representation by itself, through the sheer strength of its palpable presence.

A great influence on the shaping of this self-effacing obligation on the part of the observer was played by the rules of non-intrusive behaviour elaborated by ethnographers and anthropologists in order to carry out participant observation in pre-industrial societies without allowing their own presence to alter the 'real' conditions of the phenomenon being looked at. The methodologies followed by these scientists in their face-to-face observations of far away and 'primitive' societies had now to be transplanted into metropolitan and industrial England and were in fact borrowed by such participant observers as George Orwell – and Jack London three decades before him.¹⁴ These documentary writers and the social enquiries they carried out became notorious for the field operation techniques and even the 'field wardrobes' they used in order to pass unobserved while surveying the most deprived and distressed areas of London and the industrial districts, with a view to understand and document the conditions of living of large sections of the British people who were as much unknown to the well-to-do minority as were the populations of the Trobriand Islands to the average European.

Though cinema was one of the main fields where documentary art thrived, no medium can show the fallacy of the Socialist Realist aesthetic formula better than film, as I will argue in the following pages.



Reinstating the sublime into documentary film (from Isaac Julien's *True North*)

A panoptic eye

At the basis of the 1930s documentary movement there was no doubt a 'scientific' urge to diagnose the ailments of society in order to eliminate them with a fit political cure. It was considered morally imperative to examine in full detail the 'condition of Britain' – as it was often referred to – by applying the most unfailing and 'impersonal' methodological instruments to it. Such vast sociological projects as those launched by the Mass Observation movement aimed at leaving no unsearched-into corner in the body of society, by creating a mass body of observers who might reach unbiased understanding of reality by the sheer multiplication of their angles of observation.¹⁵ The utopian dream of a panoptic view seemed to come true thanks to the institution of an army of semi-skilled, or semi-amateurish, observers scattered all over the country, busy capturing their individually biased impressions of their surroundings.¹⁶ Each report would be partial and personal, but would acquire objectivity when poised against the other ones. Hopes were also cherished that this kind of mass observation might offer both the subject matter and the techniques for really objective documentary writing. Though the movement and its methods attracted some fierce criticism and dismissals, even by sociologically minded authors like Orwell, the proportions of the phenomenon were really impressive.¹⁷ More than five thousand people were involved one way or other in the gathering of observations, and they belonged to all social conditions and professions, including some outstanding intellectuals and artists – such as Dorothy Richardson and H.D. – whose poetics and sympathies were totally at variance with realism.¹⁸

The ambitious dream of getting a thorough knowledge of the 'condition of Britain' was pursued by a number of other movements and organisations as well. Prominent among them was the Left Book Club, whose members described themselves as "the new encyclopaedists", i.e. "a great body of learners", who had also to be "teachers and missionaries on a grand scale".¹⁹ As a matter of fact the left wing intellectuals and artists of the time felt very strongly the pedagogic urge to reveal and explain to the unconverted the wrongs and horrors of social inequality. Quasi-photographic realism suggesting impersonal objectivity was considered the most appropriate style to spread humanitarian awareness. Naturally enough documentary film became a very successful genre in the 1930s and offered itself as the privileged testing ground for realism.

In Great Britain the genre was greatly enhanced by the economic support offered by the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit – later to become the General Post Office Film Unit – within the frame of a larger imperial project. Documentary film makers were implicitly encouraged to help create an 'imagined community' held together by links of mutual

¹⁵ The movement constituted "both a form of self-ethnography and an examination of social alterity", as stated by Tanya Barson in her "Time present and time past" (in *Making History*, 9-25). Their early results and difficulties were discussed in Charles Madge and Tom Harrison, *Mass Observation. First Year's Work* (London: Drummond, 1938).

¹⁶ "We must know what *all* men and women are and can be and want to be", one of its founders, Harrison, wrote on the *Left News*, 15 (July 1937), 446.

¹⁷ Orwell wrote that "The typical Mass-Observation would have elephant ears, a loping walk and a permanent sore eye for looking through keyholes". His article, originally published in the 28 May 1947 issue of *The Tribune*, is now in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. by S. Orwell and I. Angus (London: Secker and Warburg, 1988), Vol. IV, 309.

¹⁸ See Georgina Taylor, *H. D. and the Public Sphere of Modernist Women Writers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 150.

¹⁹ Cf. Victor Gollancz's editorials for the *Left Book News*, nn.1 (May 1936), 6, and 24 (April 1938), 752. The Club produced an impressive number of books – 252 titles between 1936 and 1948 – contributing to create the overall documentarist atmosphere of the decade.

²⁰ *Night Mail* was produced in 1936 by Basil Wright, in collaboration with Cavalcanti. Auden's homonymous poem was musically woven into Benjamin Britten's stringent sound track, together with scanty, extremely factual conversation, resonant of the different accents of the regions through which the postal train races on its way from London to Edinburgh.

²¹ Auden's lyric can be found in his *Collected Shorter Poems. 1927-1957* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 83-84.

recognition of the vital role each local community or social section played inside the overall body of the Nation and the Empire, however obscure and subaltern they might be – or, perhaps, the more obscure and subaltern they were. It is by no chance that the preferred areas surveyed by the panoptic and hidden eye of these documentary films were literally underground – like the coal mines penetrated by Alberto Cavalcanti's searching camera in *Coal Face* (1935) – or located at the extreme borders of the Nation where conditions of life were economically and climatically very hard – like the North Sea coastal villages of Scotland whose herring fleet is the subject of John Grierson's documentary epic *Drifters* (1929). It is not surprising that among the films sponsored by these official bodies there was a little masterpiece like *Night Mail*, which celebrated the unifying function of the GPO itself, symbolized by its night mail special train.²⁰ In spite of its low-tone, almost gritty, technology and outlook, the train (and its staff) could boast chronometrically exact efficiency in weaving a web of interlocking links between a scattered community, by bringing "Letters of thanks, letters from banks,/ Letters of joy from girl and boy,/ Receipted bills and invitations/ To inspect new stock or to visit relations,/ And applications for situations/ [...]/ Clever, stupid, short and long,/ The typed and printed and spelt all wrong.", in the words of the half-joking voice-over comment written by W. H. Auden.²¹ Nor is it surprising that some of these films offered a celebration of colonial modernity, like Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934), which was jointly sponsored by the GPO Film Unit, the Empire Tea Marketing Board and the Ceylon Tea Board.

The style had been set by Robert Flaherty's pioneering *Nanook of the North*, produced as a documentary story in 1922, after some twenty years of intermittent participant observation and experimental recording of the prohibitive everyday experiences of the Inuit communities living in the Canadian Hudson Bay stretching towards the Arctic frontier.



Filming *Nanook of the North*. Courtesy of Isaac Julien.



Nanook of the North. Backstage photograph.

There was no proper voice-over, because the film still belonged to the silent cinema era. But omniscient comment was provided by the captions illustrating the scenes. The imperative of the film-makers' impersonality was so strongly endorsed by Flaherty that he and the other members of the filming troupe did not intervene – or at least this was the legend circulated at the time – to help the Inuit community at a very critical moment of their walrus hunt. The pretence of non-interference is as absolute as the invisibility of the camera eye. The audience stares at the scenes of bare survival of Nanook and his family, caught in the grips of extreme situations among ice fields in the middle of the Arctic sublime, as if no technical or human intermediary were there at all. And the reality effect is strengthened, no doubt, by the extra filmic knowledge that a few years later Nanook was actually killed in circumstances very similar to those shown in the film. The rhythm and pathos of the film are such that one tends not to remember other extra filmic circumstances like the fact that Nanook's family was not a family in the first place, but a group of photogenic Inuit hired by the production, and that the clothes, technical tools and procedures they were made to use were generally old-fashioned at the time, and even the masterful and cinematically arresting process of the igloo construction followed a technique already obsolete in the Twenties and was yet another symptom of the film's nostalgic yearning for intact and genuine anthropological authenticity.²²

By artificially reconstructing a lost authenticity, these documentary films partake with a vengeance in the melancholy attitude often imputed to classical anthropology because of its effort to preserve the last gasps of dying cultures, and to endow them with posthumous life.

²² Flaherty rehearsed a similar feat when he filmed the hardships of life in the small island of Aran off the Irish bay of Galway. His *Man of Aran* (1934) features breath arresting scenes of giant sharks being fished by harpoon, according to a practice which had been abandoned almost a century before.



Miners eating their lunch underground (from *Coal Face*).



Conditions of work in the mines (from *Coal Face*).

Re-assembling truth

If some of the most overtly realist documentaries produced by the founders of the genre reveal only inadvertently how 'Truth' was grossly fabricated,

the reverse is also true. Quite often their style is deeply influenced by the experimental languages of the avant-garde movements and their films do not try to conceal their nature of artistic artefacts, though maintaining their intention to investigate chosen aspects of social reality. Their principal aim remained to get as honestly as possible at some obscured social truth and make it understood by as large audiences as possible. But they were also artists, and worked in collaboration with well-known poets and musicians belonging to the experimental avant-garde.

Let us look for example at *Coal Face*, a 12 minute film produced in 1935 by John Grierson and directed by Alberto Cavalcanti. It is one of the 'classics' of this momentous genre of films, which attempt to probe into British culture by means of quasi-anthropological investigations carried out at home. It is an exploration of the Other inside western civilization; the Other at Home, invisible to the eye of people living in the cities brightly lit thanks to the obscure underground work of the miners; an Other whose life takes place far from the urban centres, far from the Centre, in the shadow of huge, black piles of slag. The immersion into the mine itself, its revelation, is embedded in the middle of the film, which is constituted as a sort of triptych. The aspiration to offer an objective documentary presentation of the conditions of living and working in the mining counties is plainly evident in the two short sections – less than five minutes each – placed at the beginning and at the end. These two end-sections are like two short essays, full of factual information and scientific data, such as the chemical composition of coal, the geographical dislocation of the mines, the quantities extracted, consumed at home or exported, the fields of activity where coal is employed, and so on. The voice-over is impassive, impersonal, professional. It is the voice of science. It knows the truth, all the Truth.

With its expressionistic musical score – composed by Benjamin Britten – and camera work – provided by Basil Wright and Stuart Legg – the central section of the film partly belies this aspiration to factual exposition. The descent into the bowels of the mine is a sort of descent into hell, rendered in a very dramatic way by the upward angle of the shooting and lighting, which projects the miners into an epic dimension by magnifying their bodies and the shadows they cast on the rocky wall of the tunnel, while Britten's evidently non-naturalistic musical comment provides an expressionist interpretation of the agonizing hardships and fatigue of underground work, the strident clash between man and his working environment. When we see the interior of the mine we do not know how the camera penetrated into it. The enormous difficulties of shooting in such a limited space – which obliges the miners to work in a crouching position – are carefully obliterated. The camera gaze seems omnipotent, like the voice-over, which comments in a grave, uniform, impersonal tone.

But pathos is provided by the music accompaniment, with its choral – rigorously male – inserts; while relief for the end of the shift and the coming back into the open is expressed by argentine sounds and mixed choirs.²³ In its mixture of verbal and musical components, the comment is emphatically non-emphatic. For example the statistical listing of casualties is pronounced in a totally flat tone, which is in Brechtian ‘epic’ contrast with the harsh shrieks from the choir.

Of the three questions in my title (“Who is speaking, of whom, to whom?”) the film answers unequivocally only the second one. It certainly speaks about the miners and their work; but, in spite of its open political and ideological interpellation, both the origin and destination of the speaking voice remain anonymous and intentionally obliterated.

Even more important than music for recreating and re-assembling reality, was the impact of montage. Sometimes montage intervened very decisively, juxtaposing fragments of reality in such a way that the presence of a gaze behind the camera stood inevitably revealed. Even more so when montage was applied also to the sound track, creating a clash between sound and image, as Mark Nash remarks of Jennings’ *Listen to Britain* (1942).²⁴ In Wright’s *Song of Ceylon* (1934) the track was even more experimental, with its montage of constructed ‘exotic’ and ‘industrial’ sound.²⁵

In the field of cinema, the very use of montage, by stressing the artificiality and arbitrariness of the resulting images, shows that the faith of the documentarists in the possibility of catching reality ‘as it really was’ was not as absolute and acritical as some of their own slogans suggested. Also in the field of literary documentary, authors were often aware of the fallacy implied in photographic or cinematic metaphors like Isherwood’s quite passive, not thinking “camera with its shutter open”. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* – his much discussed documentary survey of one of the most distressed areas of the mining counties, published in 1937 under the auspices of the Left Book Club – George Orwell had provided sharp self-criticism of his own efforts to carry out ‘objective’ observation. He had observed himself in the act of observing. He had registered his impossibility to overcome the barrier which separated him from the observed reality, in spite of the material and cultural camouflage techniques borrowed from ethnographers and anthropologists; and, notoriously, he had described his helpless attempts to suppress his feeling of otherness, and even of disgust, when confronted with the lived culture he was supposed to be sharing from the inside.²⁶ Once again, the hypostatized neutrality of the observer was disproved, and the discursive nature of truth was highlighted by contrast. Once again, the aspiration to produce a document classifiable as “by, for, and about the people” was baffled.

²³ The film does not show a single woman nor a child, not even on the background of the derelict terraced houses, whose squalor had been masterly portrayed by D. H. Lawrence. The washing hung up to dry only indirectly implies the feminine presence.

²⁴ In his “Un-making history: thoughts on the return to documentary” (in Tanya Barson et al., *Making History*, 41, 42 and 46) Nash comments on the assemblage of sound and images of everyday life in wartime, created by Jennings.

²⁵ Nash compares this technique with the symphonic structure of Vertov’s *Enthusiasm*, and stresses the disjuncture between sound and image the film operates by the use of a 1680 commentary by Robert Knox as a narrative voice-over (ibid.).

²⁶ The outcry his critical stance caused at the time among the intellectual left was in fact comparable to the shock, which would be produced some decades later by the posthumous publication of Bronislaw K. Malinowski’s *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1967).

“Looking through a circle in a circle of looks”

The anthropologically induced dream of total and objective representation of a genuine, though dying, culture has been cultivated for a long time. Endless examples come to mind of anthropologists, ethnologists and ethnomusicologists who have endeavoured to capture the dying breath of cultures threatened with extinction. They obeyed the ‘scientific’ urge to classify rationally, label and archive the entire humanity, in all its manifestations of thought and feeling. Only recently their totalizing aspiration has been interrogated and challenged. As Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Reassemblage* aptly states, “Reality is delicate/ My irreality and imagination are otherwise dull/ The habit of imposing a meaning to every single sign”.²⁷

²⁷ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Reassemblage*, 96.

The current revival of documentary cinema has inherited the rich critical debate, which has dominated the field of humanist studies in the last few decades, problematizing the whole question of scientific and representational truth. It is by no chance that Isaac Julien and Mark Nash speak of “experiments with truth”. Neither is it by chance that Lars Von Trier and the “Dogumentarism” movement, for all (or perhaps because of) its severe Decalogue of rules amounting to the so called “Vow of Chastity”, tend to bring to the fore the process of ‘construction’ of the image, and to remind – unremittingly – their audience that what they are presented with is a technically contrived representation of truth, and not a simple, innocent, transparent reflection of Truth; that what they see “is not a just image, it is just an image”, as was declared many decades ago by Jean-Luc Godard.²⁸ The well-timed asynchronies, the black frames interrupting the ‘natural’ flow of scenes, the slightly trembling shots, which occasionally reveal the instability of the hand-held camera, are programmatically introduced by the new “Dogumentarists” to recall the absence of any authoritative source of truth behind the camera, since truth has been relativized once and for all by philosophers, historians and social scientists alike, and is felt to be the product of discursive practices.

²⁸ See Iain Chambers in this issue.

A similar deflation of the notion of objectivity is pursued by those artists who make use of a variety of ‘real’ newsreels, documentaries, and other ‘objective’ texts, playing them one against the other. Harun Farocki’s cinema offers many examples of this technique. His (and Andrei Ujica’s) 1992 *Videograms of a Revolution*, is a complex montage of official Romanian TV broadcasts (both those released by Ceaușescu’s regime and those produced by the new government immediately after the 1989 *coup*), amateur short films and videos, and recordings of common people watching those ‘documents’ during and after the events leading to Ceaușescu’s fall. Through this montage the film shows that the representation of political reality is always produced at the intersection of contrasting discourses of power, and its reception takes place within an ideological field structured

in struggle. Its understanding, therefore, is always ‘counter punctual’, in Edward Said’s sense of the word, not only because it must be compared with competing representations, but also because it can and will always be used against the grain. As the voice-over comments in *Before Your Eyes*, Farocki’s 1982 film about representations of the Vietnam War,

Photographs often simultaneously say too much because of their iconic density, and too little, because political reality is too complex to be re-presented as an arrangement of visual phenomena.

The image in question is a well known photo of two American soldiers in Vietnam: one is listening to the ground with a stethoscope, in order to detect the underground movements of the Vietcong digging tunnels for the guerrilla; the other is ready to combat, a rifle with fixed bayonet in his hands. The man with the stethoscope looks like a physician. He may be read as a physician who wants to cure Vietnam. But, as Farocki himself explained in an interview, there are two possible readings of the same image: either “The Vietcong are an illness that is afflicting Vietnam”, or “The Vietcong are the blood which flows through the veins of Vietnam. Its heartbeat and pulse”.²⁹ Whichever the photographer’s preferred meaning, once the photograph has entered the field of vision of an audience, it will be exposed to a plurality of readings.

As Lacan rightly said of the subject, there is always a field of vision pre-existing before any gaze: while I have only one point of view from which to look, I am constantly looked at from a plurality of points of view. The panoptical relation must be reversed and a much more complicated constellation of relations comes into play when I see that besides observing the other I am constantly observed by the other, and that both observer and observed modify each other, by returning the gaze and observing themselves not only in the act of observing but also of being observed. Paul Valéry’s *Jeune Parque* looking at herself looking at herself rightly fascinated Lacan.³⁰

Although Lacan did not envisage this further development, the decentring of the panoptic eye under the effect of the rebounding and reciprocal modification of gazes gathers special momentum when the other becomes an ethnical Other and what comes to be decentred and refracted is the Eurocentric eye/I. Fanon’s famous description of the identity of the colonized being constituted as the Other under the abjectifying gaze of the white subject has been greatly complicated by post-colonial theorists, writers and film-makers who have put in motion an ongoing mise-en-abyme of that primal scene of othering. A declared line of filiation from Fanon’s seminal theory is to be found in Homi Bhabha’s loving re-readings, re-writings and re-visions, which retrace the zigzagging interplay of gazes

²⁹ “Dog from the Freeway”, in Harun Farocki. *Working on the Sight-Lines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 109 and 110.

³⁰ Cf. Paul Valéry, *La Jeune Parque*, quoted more than once in Jacques Lacan’s *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979).

³¹ An exemplary instance of Bhabah's constant updating of post-colonial discourse and Fanon's in particular, is his "Foreword: Framing Fanon", to the new translation of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

³² Assia Djébar, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Paris: Jean-Claude Lattès, 1985). As happens in the above-mentioned essay-films, the narration is based on a variety of eyewitnesses' reports revisited by the author and poised one against the other together with the narrator's own reconstruction.

³³ The expedition was fully documented by official reports of all kinds, including the work of four painters, five drawers, and ten engravers (see Djébar, *L'Amour*, 17).

between colonizer and colonized, the west and the rest; an interplay which is vertiginously whirled up by the various shades of hybridity now complicating the scene.³¹ In *L'Amour, la fantasia*, such profound writer as French Algerian Assia Djébar describes the myriad of gazes crossing each other in the primal encounter between colonizer-to-be and colonized which preceded the French storming and occupation of Algiers in June 1830.³² Thousands of eyes spy the unknown city from the French ships anchored in the bay, while thousands of eyes spy the enemy from behind shutters, lattices and jealousies in Algiers. A myriad of descriptions written, drawn and painted by eyewitnesses of the event are also appropriated by the author, who constructs a multiaccented and counter-pointed narration, interrogating the master-texts of Imperial History and making them resonate with other voices and stories.³³

The list of post-colonial theorists and artists who have become aware of this interplay, while trying to answer the question famously posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her 1985 pamphlet *Can the Subaltern speak?*, is immense and it would be impossible to recall them here. I will therefore leave the last word to the voice-over in Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage*, that I quoted in my exergo:

What I see is life looking at me
I am looking through a circle in a circle of looks.