Rehabilitating Observation: The Persistence of Observational Documentary in the Age of Post-Truth Politics

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Abstract | With the postmodernist realignment of our epistemological foundations, contemporary documentary has come to be marked by the idea that problematizing the relationship with the real is inherently good and progressive, and that the core quality of contemporary documentary has come to be its suspicion towards its own relationship to the real (Steyerl 2011; Rangan 2014; Takahashi 2015). In a time, which the assertion of the indiscernibility between fact and fiction has been appropriated by discourses of power I will argue that the facticity of reality needs our attention and care more than our suspicion. Thus, following philosophical proposals for a new empiricism (Latour 2004; Haraway 1988), and a Bazinian ontologization of cinema (Bazin 2005a, 2005b), I will argue for the persistence of observational documentary and a new critical realism set in the vein of contemporary observational documentary practises like Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel’s Leviathan (2012) and Kevin Jerome Everson’s Tonsler Park (2017).

Keywords | documentary theory, truth production, observational documentary, new empiricism, situated knowledges, reflexivity, lens-based capture, representation
Documentary cinema is characterized by an unsurpassed frequency with which it reflects on its relationship to truth (Nichols 1991; Balsom 2017b). On one hand, the filmic images’ supposed indexical relation to the profilmic reality – guaranteed by the process of lens-based capture – is thought to shape our fundamental expectations to what documentary is (Nichols 1991, 27). On the other hand indexical status of the image simultaneously, gives rise to the question of how much reality has been distorted in this process (Cowie 2011, 2, 20). Thus, the notion of indexicality not only comes to define the dominant expectations to the documentary image, it also invests documentary with ethical problems and epistemological anxiety. In other words, it introduces the technical and ultimately philosophical question: does the documentary image lie, or does it tell the truth? (Cowie 2011, 8). Exactly because of this inherent paradox, documentary images have been subject to chronic suspicion (Nichols 1991, 32–33; Rangan 2014, 2; Balsom 2017b). However, with the poststructuralist refusal of essential truths, we seemed to have entered a time in which truth on screen has been lost for good. In her essay, Documentary Uncertainty, Hito Steyerl writes 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”(Steyerl 2011, n.p.). To Steyerl, the perpetual doubt that what we see is “true”, “real” and “factual” that accompanies contemporary documentary reception is not a shameful weakness for documentary. On the contrary, Steyerl points to this uncertainty as the only certain and reliable concept in a current time marked by the poststructuralist destabilization of notions like “truth” and “reality” (Steyerl 2011). Hence, according to Steyerl, contemporary documentary’s inherent uncertainty, doubt and ambiguity function as a means to articulate the “fundamental dilemma of contemporary risk societies” and thus constitute the core quality of contemporary documentary modes of filmmaking (Steyerl 2011, n.p.). Steyerl’s view follows a poststructuralist line of thinking that sees all images as equally constructed
(Baudrillard 2000) and insists on the rhetorical nature of truth (Foucault 1997; Derrida 1997). By foregrounding the contingent and historically contextualized character of all truth-claims, poststructuralist critique has sought to undercut claims to universal truths. However, within the last decades, this suspicion towards any essentialist notions of truth has been slowly appropriated by hegemonic power formations that have transformed a critical practice into a straw man attack on truth itself (Thail et al. 2018; Higgins 2016; Sismondo 2017). Today, the concept of truth, once a site for critical investigation, seems to have eroded with the alleged collapse of reality (Baudrillard 2000). Thus, the rise of post-truth politics, fake news as well as cultural and value relativism in the West all testify to a new epistemological crisis characterized by a pervasive devaluation of truth (D’Ancona 2017; Ball 2017; Davis 2017; Rose 2017; Thail et al. 2018). Recently, it has been proposed that the emergence of the “post-truth”-era has brought about a Columbus’ egg for the problem of documentary representation. In a round-up article titled “The best documentaries of 2016: cinematic nonfiction in the year of nonfact” published in Sight & Sound in April 2017, filmmaker Robert Greene programmatically declares that with the pervasive devaluation of truth, documentary can once and for all give up its “long, Quixotic quest to properly display Truth [sic] onscreen […] the era of post-truth documentary is manifest[1]” (Greene 2017, n.p.). As a documentary practice that stresses the nonintervention of the filmmaker, eschews commentary and accords primacy to lens-based capture[2] (Nichols 1991, 38–44), observational documentary emerges as a prime target for poststructuralist suspicion. Accused of a renunciation of its own mediation and subjectivisms, the observational mode comes to be marked as epistemologically naïve and not sufficiently reflexive (Trinh 2013; Williams 1993; Marcus 1990; Kiener 2006). As Erika Balsom notes: “To examine the vanguard of documentary theory and practice over the last thirty years, for instance,
is to encounter a deep and pervasive suspicion of its relationship to the real and, more particularly, a robust rejection of its observational mode” (Balsom 2017b, n.p.). Against the polemical contestation of the observational documentary and the idea of a *post-truth documentary* that has lost its faith in representation and given up its claim to represent truth on screen, I suggest that we ask whether the observational documentary’s claim to actuality through lens-based capture and an ethics of attunement can be a fertile site for a production of truth in an age of *post-truth politics*. Thus, following Erika Balsom’s essay, “The Reality-Based Community” (Balsom 2017b), I will revisit the discourse regarding documentary’s relationship to truth and the rejection of its observational mode. The purpose of this essay is not to disallow previous critique of the observational mode, which I believe has been both legitimate and innovative. By contrast, the purpose of this essay is to break with a simplified and teleological conception of documentary that sees observational and reflexive modes as opposing methodologies for representing reality and engaging with the production of truth (Rangan 2014). With reference to Haraway and Latour’s different critiques of postmodernist critique (Haraway 1988; Latour 2004), I suggest that we re-evaluate the efficacy of previous postmodernist representational strategies. Building on their proposals for “feminist” and “second” empiricism (Haraway 1988, 580; Latour 2004, 232) I will argue for the persistence of observational documentary practices in our current moment. Recalling André Bazin’s ontology of the photographic image (Bazin 2005a), I will argue for an ontology of cinema, in which cinema offers a reparative relation to an embattled real. Furthermore, Bazin’s notion of *integral realism* (Bazin 2005b, 87), will be introduced as a way to conceptualise contemporary observational documentary as a mode of representation that is traversed by reflexivity rather than opposed to it. By making an argument for observational documentary as a site for the production of truth, I engage with a notion that is hard to delimit and talk about. My aim is not to reinforce some essentialist notion of truth that is more bulletproof than others but to
examine how the challenging notion of truth can be addressed through contemporary observational documentary practices. Countering the strain of formally reflexive documentaries characteristic to the “documentary turn” in contemporary art (Lind and Steyerl 2008, 11; Takahashi 2015; Enwezor 2004), recent artists’ practices display a reconceived commitment to the observational mode and assert the primacy of lens-based capture. These practices include seminal works affiliated with Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) such as People’s Park (J.P. Sniadecki and Libbie Dina Cohn 2012), an eighty-minute long tracking shot through an urban park in Chengdu, China, MANAKAMANA (Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez 2013), a film set entirely within a cable car above the Nepali jungle and Leviathan (Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor 2012), a portrait of a world at sea shot primarily on GoPro camera’s strapped to the fishermen’s labouring bodies and the massive vessel. Other practices that reengage with the observational mode include the works of artists and filmmakers like Wang Bing, Rosalind Nashashibi, Ben Rivers, Ben Russel, Salomé Lamas, Eric Badelaire and Kevin Jerome Everson. Despite their vast differences, I will argue that all of these practices seek to engage in a sphere of representation beyond – and, indeed, in opposition to – mass media by means of lens-based capture. Rather than pursuing any kind of essentialist truth waiting out there to be captured, these films engage in a production of an intersubjective truth from a situated, reflexive perspective; the embodied encounter with what James Agee has called “the cruel radiance of what is” (Agee and Evans 2001, 9).

The Battlefields of Epistemology
In this essay, I will examine how the observational mode of documentary filmmaking partakes in the creation of truth. One way to go about this task could be to start with a comprehensive definition of the terms truth and documentary. However, I will refrain from doing so. On one hand, poststructuralist thinking has already thoroughly demonstrated that the notion of truth is “as solid as the fleeting reflections on a
troubled surface of water” (Steyerl 2011, n.p.). On the other hand, documentary theory – more than ninety years after John Grierson introduced the term in his 1926 review of Robert Flaherty’s Moana (1926)[3] – still struggles to find a satisfactory definition of the term (Stallabrass 2013, 14; Ribas 2016). Therefore, in Steyerl's words, I will not attempt to perform “an exercise of Negative theology” and reiterate all the definitions that the documentary mode and the notion truth fail to live up to (Steyerl 2011, n.p.). Rather, I will try to trace how documentary’s claim to truth changes concurrently with a change in the notion of truth. Citing Brian Winston in Claiming the Real (1995), I will consider how disputes on the status and production of truth and knowledge have been fought on the “battlefields of epistemology” that constitute the field of documentary (Winston 1995, 242).

As reflected in many recent discussions on documentary theory and practice, the anxiety regarding documentary’s claim to truth has existed since the inception of the documentary form (Balsom 2017b; Balsom and Peleg 2016; Steyerl 2011). Thus, John Grierson’s founding definition of documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality” is reiterated throughout contemporary literature to emphasize that the dialectic tension between truth and falsity, realism and constructivism, representation and reflexivity has been around since the founding of the genre (Balsom and Peleg 2016, 13; Balsom 2017a; Rangan 2014, 2; Trinh 2013, 85). Despite this apparent awareness, canonical documentary theory, perhaps best exemplified in Bill Nichols’ extensive work, has depicted the history of the documentary as a teleological development towards greater suspicion of documentary's truth claim (Nichols 1991, 32–75; Rangan 2014, 2). In Representing Reality, Nichols identifies four documentary modes: the expository mode, the observational mode, the participatory mode and the reflexive mode[4] (Nichols 1991, 32). Nichols defines documentary modes as “basic ways of organizing texts in relation to certain recurrent features or conventions” (Nichols 1991, 32). According to Nichols, these various representational strategies belong in a dialectic where new modes arise as
filmmakers become aware of the epistemological or ethical constraints of the previous modes[5] (Nichols 1991, 32). Nichols ties the observational mode to ethnographic film and the technological innovations of the 1950s and 1960s, which facilitated new, flexible and increasingly unobtrusive approaches to record and represent reality with presumably little interference from the filmmaker[6]. These technological developments gave rise to various film movements such as Direct Cinema in the United States and Canada, Free Cinema in Britain, and cinéma-vérité in France (MacDonald 2013, 2; Tay 2008, 8). In overall terms, the predominant discourse on observational cinema has (sometimes perhaps unintentionally) contributed to a conception of observational documentary as a mode that strived towards a “fly-on-the-wall” neutrality and objectivity[7] (Cowie 2011, 20).

These unconscious conventions of objectivity and evidence have historically invested the observational documentary with the “impression of authentic truth” (Rangan 2014, 2). However, under the impact of semiotics and poststructuralist thought, it became increasingly untenable to assert transparent truths, objective knowledge and a reality outside of discourse (Winston 1995, 242). Through his notion of a “politics of truth”, Michel Foucault argues that truth is produced by a form of exercising power that confines in advance what does and does not count as truth and what kind of knowledge we accept as the given field of knowledge (Foucault 1997, 32; Butler 2006). As Steyerl asserts, a paradox arose when the concepts used to define and legitimate the documentary form (“truth”, “reality” and “objectivity”) lost their transparency and turned out to be “dubious, debatable and risky” (Steyerl 2011, n.p.). Thus, Winston concludes, the postmodernist concern with truth “transforms ‘actuality’ […] from a legitimation into an ideological burden” (Winston 1995, 243).

This postmodern epistemological realignment provoked a crisis for documentary in witch observational documentary became a prime target for critique (Balsom 2017b; Steyerl 2011a; Winston 1995). A part of the crisis was the awareness that documentary not only communicates statements and meanings through its
narratives in images, sounds and language; it partakes in the construction and deployment of discourses about reality (Cowie 2011, 49–50; Steyerl 2003). The consensus concerning documentary as an ideological commentary on the world is heavily indebted to Bill Nichols' articulation of documentary’s kinship to the so-called “discourses of sobriety”, i.e. the positivist discourses of domains like science, economics, education and politics (Nichols 1991, 3; Rangan 2014, 2; Cowie 2011, 2). According to Nichols, these discourses “regard their relationship to the real as direct, immediate, transparent” (Nichols 1991, 4). Not far off from the notion of “politics of truth”, Nichols describes the discourses of sobriety as “the vehicles of domination and conscience, power and knowledge, desire and will” (Nichols 1991, 4). According to Pooja Rangan, the juxtaposition of documentary and discourses of sobriety have offered analytical tools to criticize the unconscious conventions of objectivity and evidence that have historically invested documentary with the “impression of authentic truth” (Rangan 2014, 2). Through this articulation, the poststructuralist critique of modernity migrated to the documentary tradition.

Within this poststructuralist episteme, the observational documentary mode emerges as a bad object[8]. Accused of a renunciation of its own mediation and subjectivisms, the observational mode is deemed epistemologically naïve, voyeuristic and a means for domination (Nichols 2017, 38–44, 133; Trinh 1991, 1992; Williams 1993). In “Documentary Is/Not a Name”, Trinh describes documentary as a commodity that “set a value on intimate observation and assess its worth according to how well it succeeds in capturing reality on the run” (Trinh 2013, 69 italics original). Through the use of location recordings, synchronized sounds, minimal use of montage and wide-angle shots, the observational documentary has developed a manipulative aesthetic of objectivity and technology of truth through which the documentary makes claims to capture and present reality – with direct inscription as a guarantee of truth (Trinh 2013, 69). At the core of this strategy, she claims, is a Cartesian division of the subject and object accompanied by other structuring binaries such as
filmmaker-versus-other, truth-versus-false. In this worldview, the filmmaker is placed in a position of power and authority over the production of meaning regarding the object of their film. Yet, this position of power is either rendered invisible by referring to the unmediated nature of the documentary or deemed irrelevant as an inescapable part of gathering evidence (Trinh 2013, 69f). What is presented in these documentaries is, however, not the real but a “repetitive, artificial resurrection of the real” which has proved itself overpoweringly successful in “substituting its visual and verbal signs of the real for the real” (Trinh 2013, 71, emphasis added). Hereby, Trinh suggests a situation in which the observational documentary, in its attempt to reflect reality, ends up endangering the referent.

For documentary, the postmodern rise of reflexivity causes both an interrogation of the truth claims of individual documentary films as well as a self-conscious critical stance towards the mechanisms at work within the genre as a whole. In her landmark 1993 text, “Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary”, Linda Williams points to how documentary had entered a “permanent state of the self-reflexive crisis of representation” (Williams 1993, 10). In her text, Williams brings out The Rodney King Trial (1992) as an event that seems to epitomize the transition from a modern positivist episteme to a postmodern reflexive one. To recall the event, in March 1991 Rodney King, a twenty-five-year-old black man, was stopped by the Los Angeles Police after a high-speed chase and was pulled out of his car. A nearby amateur cameraman, George Holliday, recorded on video how King was kicked and beaten repeatedly by police officers in an attack that resulted in skull fractures, permanent brain damage as well as broken bones and teeth (Sastry and Bates 2017). Despite the fact that the brutal beating was caught on video, in 1992, the officers were acquitted from their charges of “excessive use of force” by a primarily white jury[9] (Sastry and Bates 2017; Schwartz 2009; Butler 1993).
The King Trial called forth the tension between the *material authenticity* of film and video recordings and these recording’s potentially limited *documentary value*. Thus, it was brought out by documentary theorists to reflect on contemporary anxieties on the many ways in which photographic images’ seemingly self-evident truths can be undermined (Williams 1993, 10; Cowie 2011, 26; Nichols 1994, 17–42; Butler 1993). To Williams, the Rodney King Trial illustrates the contradictory role of documentary images in the postmodern era (Williams 1993, 10). This crisis called for a rejuvenation of the documentary. Williams’ solution is not to abandon the quest for documentary truth, which has always been the “receding goal of the documentary tradition” (Williams 1993, 14). Rather, what she suggests is that the “new documentary” of the postmodern era accepts that these truths “cannot be transparently represented” (Williams 1993, 13). Documentary truth, Williams claims, can only be achieved through strategies of construction and staging (Williams 1993, 12). This entails leaving behind observational mode and its “self-obscuring voyeur of vérité realism” and instead turning to reflexivity, artifice and performativity to engage with what she identifies as a “a newer, more contingent, relative, postmodern truth” (Williams 1993, 11).

As Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl have noted, documentary practices from the 1990s and onward have tended to offer “sceptical and subversive readings of documentary jargons of authenticity” (Lind and Steyerl 2008a, 14). One example is Werner Herzog’s call for an “ecstatic truth” which is only through accessible “fabrication and imagination” (Herzog 1999). Another example is Errol Morris’ critically acclaimed *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) about a man who is wrongfully accused of murder. In the film Morris’ uses highly expressionistic reenactments of different witnesses’ versions of the murder to call the certainty of events surrounding the murder case into question. Thus in 2000, Robert Stam notes that: “in contemporary post-modernist era reflexivity is the norm rather than the exception” (Stam 2000, 152). Today, contemporary mainstream documentary is dominated by modes that self-consciously
expose their distance from “the real” and the idea that problematizing the relationship to the real is something inherently good (Lind and Steyerl 2008b, 14–15; Balsom 2017b; Stam 2000, 152). According to Rangan, these practices are oriented by certain narratives in which “seriousness” is considered the opposite of realism (Rangan 2014, 1). This means that documentaries that, stage the vanishing difference between representation and the real, or question the possibility of documentary representation, are seen as more progressive and sophisticated and are therefore granted the cultural privileges of intellectual weight, institutional recognition and symbolic (or even economic) capital (Rangan 2014, 1).

**Towards a New Empiricism**

The question that arises now is whether the postmodern critique of objectivity and neutrality has perhaps outlived itself? For Balsom, this seems to be the case. In light of the events that have testified to the post-truth era, she argues, the once progressive postmodern suspicion of truth has evolved into the very rules and logics that govern our ways of knowing and thinking (Balsom 2017b). Simply put, the “post-truth politics” has taken on the status of a politics of truth in our current moment. In consequence, the postmodern suspicion toward truth has evolved from a critique to a reinforcement of a hegemonic regime of knowledge production.

In *Truth and Power*, Foucault maintains that the role of the intellectual is to demonstrate the potential for a new politics of truth (Foucault 1979). The goal, he claims, is to disentangle truth from power and hegemony through critique (Foucault 1997, 28–31, 1979). Foucault defines critique as “an investigation into the legitimacy of historical modes of knowing” (Foucault 1997, 49). What this implies is an analytical procedure in which we ask ourselves the questions of the limits of our most certain ways of knowing. Furthermore, he claims, critique is not a search for universal structures but historically dependent (Foucault 1997, 125). Building on Foucault, Butler explains that the urgency of critique arises when we begin to
experience a crisis within our epistemological field: “[…] it is from this condition, the
tear in the fabric of our epistemological web, that the practice of critique emerges,
with the awareness that no discourse is adequate here or that our reigning
discourses have produced an impasse” (Butler 2006).

As a form of critique, documentary is also relational and historically dependent.
When Trinh and Williams called for “a new documentary” or no documentary at all,
they wrote against an engrained orthodoxy in which documentary images were often
tied to domination and spectacle (Trinh 2013; Williams 1993). However, as we have
seen, the strategies they advocated for are the new orthodoxy. Thus, according to
Balsom, the reflexive strategy, yesterday's vanguard move, has fossilized into
text-book knowledge that fails to respond to the present state of emergency (Balsom
2017b; Balsom and Peleg 2016, 15). It is therefore time to interrogate the
contemporary efficacy of putting documentary's claim to actuality under erasure and
to re-evaluate the criteria we use to judge what we see as vanguard. What Balsom
calls for are new ways of thinking about the relationship between reality and form in
ways that accord primacy to lived reality while maintaining the necessary critique of
objectivity and transparency (Balsom 2017b; Balsom and Peleg 2016, 13–15).

In his much discussed 2004 article in Critical Inquiry, Bruno Latour, who himself has
dedicated most of his career to problematizing the construction of facts, expresses
doubts about proceeding too far down the path of questioning objectivity and the
production of objective facts, by suggesting that the critical spirit of postmodern
philosophy has run out of steam[10] (Latour 2004). Latour reflectively asks whether he
and other postmodern philosophers went too far in their attempt to reveal the
constructedness of “prematurely naturalized objectified facts” (Latour 2004, 227); if,
by attacking rationalism, they contributed to a situation where we no longer need to
be too careful about how consistent our claims are as these claims can always be
interpreted differently?
Latour’s critique of critique is a part of a broader tendency within academia and the humanities in recent decades in which it has become common to be critical towards critique, especially in its Marxist, Freudian or Nietzschean incarnation (Bolt 2016; Felski 2011). As Rita Felski notes, the gestures of demystification and exposure have become a “taken-for-granted methodological norm” in literary studies (Felski 2011, 231). According to Felski, this hermeneutics of suspicion (a term she borrows from Paul Ricoeur) characterizes a range of current approaches that, despite their differences in focus and method, share the conviction that the most rigorous reading of a text “is to critique it by underscoring what it does not know and cannot understand”. The danger of this tendency, she claims, is that suspicion becomes banality deprived of its former critical potential[11].

Yet, while Latour’s argument has been greatly discussed across the humanities, I find that it is worth revisiting his arguments in light of the present moment of post-truth. The article was published concurrently with the invasion of Iraq and the debate regarding the alleged existence of “weapons of mass destruction” which turned out not to exist (National Security Archive 2004). Taking this into account, the context of the article tellingly resonates with the fabrication of facts going on today in contemporary politics as well as the widespread notion that poststructuralist thinking (to some degree) laid the groundwork for our current epistemological crisis[12] (Scrutton 2017; Calcutt 2016; Cadwalladr 2017).

Writing before the declaration of the emergence of the post-truth era, the question for Latour is whether we can distinguish between conspiracists and a popularized version of social critique. In both cases, he claims, we have learned to become suspicious of everything people say and to regard every statement as rhetoric hiding the real motives of the speaking agent (Latour 2004, 228–29). Thus, Latour suggests that the postmodernist structures of explanation, resorting to power, language and discourse, have outlived their usefulness to a point at which they are now feeding “the most gullible sort of critique” (Latour 2004, 230); e.g. the claims that the Apollo
program never landed on the moon, that the Twin Towers were not destroyed by hijacked airplanes\textsuperscript{[13]} and that global warming is a hoax (Latour 2004, 226, 228). At this time, Latour argues, the danger is no longer coming from ideological arguments posing as matters of fact but from “an excessive distrust of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases!” (Latour 2004, 227).

For Latour, the postmodern critical spirit has cultivated a belief that the only way to criticize facts is by moving away from them by pointing towards the conditions for their construction (Latour 2004, 231). While enlightenment and poststructuralist critique once profited from the critical descriptive tools that were effective for exposing powers and illusions, the same philosophy, according to Latour, has found itself “totally disarmed” the moment matters of fact were debunked by the same critical impetus (Latour 2004, 232). Essentially, the effort has turned out to be off target, as the goal, Latour maintains, was never to move away from facts but to get closer to them: “not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism” (Latour 2004, 231).

Already in 1988, in her highly influential article “Situated Knowledges” in Feminist Studies, Donna Haraway warns us that even though the critique of objectivity has been necessary, going too far down the path of social constructivism will be to abandon our important claim on real, shared existence (Haraway 1988). Like Latour, Haraway notes that she too has contributed to a collective discourse that has offered a strong social constructivist critique of all forms of knowledge claims and “ideological doctrines of disembodied scientific objectivity” (Haraway 1988, 576). From this critical viewpoint, science is rhetoric for manufacturing knowledge – knowledge which leads to power rather than truth (Haraway 1988, 575–77). However, as Haraway claims, the problem with this critical inquiry, is that academics and activists, in their attempt to unmask power and truth, have distracted themselves from “getting to know the world effectively” (Haraway 1988, 577).
What Haraway recognizes is that feminism needs situated, objective knowledges produced under a doctrine of “feminist objectivity” that is markedly different from the contested notion of “scientific objectivity” (Haraway 1988, 578–80). As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have shown, the notion of objectivity itself is not a universal, timeless and transgressive scientific virtue (Daston and Galison 2010). Rather, they have shown, the notion of objectivity is itself historically contingent. Though their genealogical research, they demonstrate how objectivity emerges alongside the development of technologies for mechanical reproduction – especially, but not exclusively, the invention of photography (Daston and Galison 1992, 98). These technologies were thought to extirpate human intervention between object and representation and hereby to offer an "an objective view" of objects studies (Daston and Galison 2007, 10). Thus, objectivity comes to be conceptualized as “a view from nowhere” (Daston and Galison 2007, 51).

What Haraway proposes is the foundation for a new critical practice that is characterized by a commitment to faithful accounts of a "real" world and our shared existence as well as an awareness of the historical contingency for all knowledge claims and a recognition of its own "semiotic technologies" for making meanings (Haraway 1988, 579). Whereas feminist constructivism, in the attempt to nurture and protect the sense of collective historical subjectivity and agency, has been busy debunking the idea of objectivity as “a hierarchical and positivist ordering of what can count as knowledge”, Haraway presents the opportunity for a feminist objectivity which is at least partially shareable, communicable and transmissible, about a world that is in some sense “real” and out there for us to experience. A “partial, locatable critical knowledge sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (Haraway 1988, 584).

Sixteen years later, Latour reiterates this call for a new descriptive tool whose import “will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care” (Latour 2004, 232). While we
can easily dismiss certain conspiracy theories (and should still maintain a
deconstructionist attitude towards these), some objects, like the laws of gravitation or
the desires we feel, are, according to Latour, “too strong” to be dismissed as
ideology or fetishes and “too weak” to be treated as “indisputable causal
explanations of some unconscious action.” (Latour 2004, 242-243). Thus, rather than
deconstructing these objects, the task of the critic is to acknowledge their
constructedness as something fragile and therefore in need of care and caution
(Latour 2004, 246).

If we take Haraway and Latour’s reflections into consideration, we might argue that
the best response to our current epistemological crisis is, therefore, a critical
practice, rooted in a reinvented empiricist approach; a “feminist empiricism”
(Haraway 1988, 580) or “a second empiricism” (Latour 2004, 232). That is, in order
to address the epistemological crisis, it is no longer sufficient to expose the historical
contingency and modes of construction for everything. Rather, as Haraway claims,
“we have to insist on a better account of the world” (Haraway 1988, 579). An account
that is rooted in a new empiricist ontology and epistemology that acknowledges the
world is and, by attending to it, we can create new visibilities and subvert dominant
narratives.

**The Persistence of Observation**

As part of her new empiricism, Haraway proposes to reclaim vision and recapture it
from the claims for scientific objectivity (Haraway 1988, 581ff). Historically,
visualizing practices have been tied to modes of violence and dominance in the
service of science, militarism, capitalism, colonialism and male supremacy. For this
reason, Haraway notes, vision has been subjected to heavy criticism in feminist
discourse (Haraway 1988, 581). Vision, she notes, is essentially a question of the
power to see (Haraway 1988, 585). Thus, she argues, we need to reclaim the sense
of vision from the perils of hard scientific objectivity. In order to do this, we first have
to give up the idea of disembodied vision, i.e. “the conquering gaze from nowhere” that has provided us with disembodied imagery from outer space to the inside of our cells (Haraway 1988, 581). This vision (the “canibaley”e” that “fucks the world”) represents an ideology of a direct, devouring, reproductive and unrestricted vision which, according to Haraway, is essentially an illusion or a god trick (Haraway 1988, 581). Feminist objectivity, Haraway claims, is not unlimited and omnipotent or detached but emerges out of the recognition of “particular and specific embodiment” (Haraway 1988, 582). By embodiment Haraway is not only talking about organic vision, but vison from a particular, situated perspective. Thus, she writes: “Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledges, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see” (Haraway 1988, 583). Unlike scientific objectivity (cf. Dalston and Galison), feminist objectivity abandons the notion of passive vision and the idea of an unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura. Rather, Haraway claims, there are only “highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds” (Haraway 1988, 583). Drawing on Haraway’s notion of persistence of vision, we could argue that observation and lens-based capture also need to be reclaimed in the context of documentary cinema. Because documentaries, as emphasized in Nichols’ generous definition, “address the world in which we live rather than a world imagined by the filmmaker” (Nichols 2017, xi), the current epistemological crisis seems to accord documentary a new urgency as a means of “getting to know the world effectively” (Haraway 1988, 577). Thus, while the observational documentary’s claim to the capture of life holds the risk of domination, it is not the only possibility. As Grimshaw notes, some of the earliest attempts to identify the key elements constituting an observational approach display an awareness of the critical parameters of observational cinema[14] (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009, 3–23; Grimshaw 2013). One of the key points in Colin Young’s seminal 1975 essay, “Observational Cinema”, is to distinguish observation from objectivity
去做笔记，Russel，filmmakers observational MacDonald the new Steyerl reflexive Enwezor Enwezor's Observational Practices in Contemporary Documentary Cinema truth production (Balsom 2017b). mode, insistence (Balsom of somewhere​ from behaviour the approach objectify (Young 2008, 2009, 2013; Young 2004). Although this shift has been associated with a rise of a formally reflexive and speculative form of documentary (Takahashi 2015, 188–89; Lind and Steyerl 2008, 14–15), the “documentary turn” in contemporary art also gave rise to a new strain of artistic documentary practices readmitted to the observational mode at the intersection of art and cinema (Dallas 2014; Sicinski 2017; Unger 2017; MacDonald 2013; Balsom 2017b, 2017a). The rejuvenated commitment to the observational mode and lens-based capture is found in a broad range of works from filmmakers and artists like Wang Bing, Rosalind Nashashibi, Ben Rivers, Ben Russel, Salomé Lamas, Eric Badelaire and Kevin Jerome Everson. As Balsom notes, these works leave behind a “pedagogy of suspicion” (Balsom 2017b, n.p.). Departing from a paradigm of formally reflexive and performative documentary

Observational Practices in Contemporary Documentary Cinema
Following the “return of the real” in contemporary art (Foster 1996), documentary practices have been a prominent feature of contemporary at least since Okwui Enwezor's Documenta 11 in 2002 (Lind and Steyerl 2008, 11; Takahashi 2015; Enwezor 2004). Although this shift has been associated with a rise of a formally reflexive and speculative form of documentary (Takahashi 2015, 188–89; Lind and Steyerl 2008, 14–15), the “documentary turn” in contemporary art also gave rise to a new strain of artistic documentary practices readmitted to the observational mode at the intersection of art and cinema (Dallas 2014; Sicinski 2017; Unger 2017; MacDonald 2013; Balsom 2017b, 2017a). The rejuvenated commitment to the observational mode and lens-based capture is found in a broad range of works from filmmakers and artists like Wang Bing, Rosalind Nashashibi, Ben Rivers, Ben Russel, Salomé Lamas, Eric Badelaire and Kevin Jerome Everson. As Balsom notes, these works leave behind a “pedagogy of suspicion” (Balsom 2017b, n.p.). Departing from a paradigm of formally reflexive and performative documentary
modes, these practices uses the power of lens-based capture to look at the facticity of phenomenal reality. Per Balsom, these contemporary practices "assert the importance of the nonhuman automatism of the camera as a means for encountering the world" (Balsom 2017b, n.p.).

An example of one of these films that uses lens-based capture to engage in a new sphere of representation is Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel's Leviathan (2012). The film opens with a brief textual prologue – a biblical quote from the description of the sea monster, Leviathan, in the Book of Job. Hereafter, the film presents the viewer with a cacophonous blackness accompanied by amplified sounds of machinery, the clanking of metal chains, creaking winches, the ocean waves crashing against the sides of the ship and gusts of wind. With no expository voice over, no establishing shots, the film gradually reveals itself as an observational recording of modern industrial fishing, captured through a plethora of GoPro and consumer DSRL cameras on board a fishing trawler at night.

The disorienting aesthetics of Leviathan raise questions that are pertinent to understand documentary's intervention in a crisis of truth. With its surreal and yet tangible aesthetics, it generates a new image of reality, while respecting the reality of the objects in the image. Coming out of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL hereafter), Leviathan represents a strain of films that, as stated on SEL's website, strives for “innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography” and “encourages attention to the many different dimensions of social experience and subjectivity that may only with difficulty be rendered with world alone” (“Sensory Ethnography Lab :: Harvard University” n.d.). Furthermore, SEL is concerned with the effort “not to analyse, but to actively produce aesthetic experience, and of kinds that reflect and draw on but do not necessarily clarify or leave one with the illusion of ‘understanding’ everyday experience.” (“Sensory Ethnography Lab :: Harvard University” n.d.). In other words, the films coming out of SEL prioritize experience over explanation and embodied knowledge over propositional knowledge. The prioritization of the body
and the senses in the engagement with and representation of the empirical world resonates with Haraway’s privileging of the body as a means for obtaining a feminist objective, situated knowledges (Haraway 1988).

Another example of a contemporary observational documentary is Kevin Jerome Everson’s *Tonsler Park* (2017). Shot on 16 mm black and white film at various different polling stations in the African American neighbourhood, Tonsler Park, in Charlottesville, Virginia during the last day of the 2016 US presidential election – the first election following Barack Obama’s two terms and an election that may put Donald Trump into office – the film depicts the quotidian act of voting seen from within a black community. In this eighty-minute portrait of workers at a polling station, we watch the poll workers perform their job as people arrive; ballots are handed out, questions are answered amid a buzz of friendly, but formal, chatter between the volunteers and the people who have come to place their votes. With its calm images of African Americans exercising their right to vote, *Tonsler Park* is a powerful counter image to the spectacle of white supremacy that has now become inseparable with the image of Charlottesville after the white supremacist rally that took place in Charlottesville in August 2017.

The film consists of about 20 shots, some of which are brief, while others last almost eleven minutes, i.e. the length of a standard roll of 16 mm film shooting at 25 frames per second. With every new person on the screen, we spend several minutes at a time studying their faces and gesture. Throughout the film, the people who have come to vote keep passing in front of the camera, creating a grey and black flicker of human bodies that, every now and then, blocks our view. By his lingering and partially concealed gaze at the world of people performing their democratic duties, Everson creates a film that refrains from any notions of immediacy or mastery and yet demands that we pay attention. Through a strategy of attunement and opacity, the film addresses the ambivalence of visibility for a population that is more susceptible than others to be represented through stereotypes or to be rendered
invisible (hooks 2015; Glissant 1997). Given the cynicism of the contemporary political landscape initiated on the day of the film, Everson’s attentive portrait of democracy at work becomes particularly affecting and effective.

We may read Tonsler Park as an attempt to investigate labour through an ethics of attunement that makes no claim to any notions of “fly-on-the-wall” immediacy or objectivity. With very little use of montage, the film provides an assertion of the preservation of the continuity of time, hereby facilitating the viewers’ encounter with contingency. Through the use of asynchronous sound and the partial concealment of the action by the bodies of people crisscrossing in front of the camera, Everson reflexively breaks away from any possible impression of total capture: what we are seeing is only a slice of reality. Yet, this slice is invested with great importance.

**Towards an Integral Realism**

With their lingering images, contemporary observational documentaries like Leviathan and Tonsler Park prioritize image over discourse, while being aware of their own meditation. By combining an empiricist ontology with a reflexive epistemology, I believe these films illustrate what Grimshaw has labelled a “Bazinian Turn” in documentary filmmaking (Grimshaw 2013). Resonating with Bazin’s ontology of the photographic image, these observational approaches use the filmic image as “the connective tissue” to an empirical reality (Marks 2010, 140), while displaying a formal awareness that “cinema is also a language” (Bazin 2005a, 17).

Like the observational documentary, Bazin’s writing has often been considered a naïve approach to cinema and reality (see e.g. C. Williams 1973). However, as a new empiricism is materializing, many of his critical concepts have been revisited and revived (see i.e. Rifkin 2011; Joret 2015; Andrew and Joubert-Laurencin 2011; Rosen 2001). What I take from Bazin is an ontology of cinema, rooted in an ontology of the photographic image, in which cinema offers a reparative relation to an embattled real. In a much-quoted passage, Bazin expounds the ontological
relationship between the photograph and the object as a physical bond between image and object, which exists independently of the photograph's rendering of visual information:

The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model. (Bazin 2005a, 14)

From this quote, it is usually derived that Bazin’s ontologization accords primacy to the means of production over visual likeness. However, recent re-readings of Bazin argue for rethinking Bazin’s ontology argument as something more than simply an indexical relation between the photograph and referent (the object) (Morgan 2006; Gunning 2007; Joret 2015; Rifkin 2011). When Bazin writes that “photography actually contributes something to the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it” (Bazin 2005a, 16) and goes as far as to state that the image “is the model”, he seems to be suggesting an ontology that is deeper and more profound than an indexical relation between the photograph and the object photographed (Morgan 2006, 450). In Bazin’s ontology, the photographic image becomes a reproduction rather than a representation. Bazin presents an ontology of the photographic image that goes beyond the limits of indexicality and technological determinism. Rather than a mediation on the mechanical or “automatic” properties of photography, I believe Bazin’s ontologization of photography and cinema offers a framework for thinking about how we may experience the presence of the empirical reality through lens-based capture. In contrast to the ontological uncertainty inherent in Steyerl’s argument, documentary value, for Bazin, derives from the ontology of the photographic image. This is a point he reiterates throughout his critical writing,
including in his essay “In Defence of Rossellini” in which he states that “[t]here is ontological identity between the object and its photographic image” (Bazin 2005b, 99). This, in the case of Leviathan documentary value does not only reside in the uncertainty of the images (mirroring the uncertainty of the world) but in the encounter, they facilitate with the world through their photographic base. As Stephen Rifkin concludes, Bazin’s ontology provides an “opportunity to reflect on the uses of representation, and thus on the many ways in which we conceive of our encounter with the world and with each other, and what we hope to gain from them”28 (Rifkin 2011, 286).

Paraphrasing André Malraux (“Par ailleurs, le cinéma est une industri”), Bazin finishes his essay “The Ontology of The Photographic Image” by saying: “On the other hand, of course, cinema is also language” (Bazin 2005a, 16). Hence, he reminds us how cinema moves beyond the mechanical reproduction of reality by emphasizing that, although his cinema is oriented by the ontology of the photographic image, it is not completely determined by it (Bazin 2005a, 16). Consistent with Blandine Joret and Tom Gunning, I will argue that the key to unlocking this dichotomy lies in Bazin’s mythical concept of integral realism (Joret 2015, 159, 177; Gunning 2011, 123). Through the notion of integral realism, Bazin conceptualizes the bridge between cinema and reality as an infinite approximation. In maths, integration functions as operation of calculus (the study of continuous change) in which one attempts add an infinite number of small units to a whole. Applying the Newtonian logic of the integral to film, Bazin finds that realist films create an image of reality that is ultimately equal: these films approximate reality but never reach it. In other words, Bazin’s integral realism, ultimately, does not solve the dilemma between image and reality. Rather, it maintains this difference as unsolvable. The task for a truly realist cinema, then, is not to reproduce reality but, as we have seen, to recreate the world in its own image. Applying the Newtonian logic of the integral to film, Bazin finds a certain films (especially by directors
associated with the Italian Neorealist movement; Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica and Luchino Visconti) create an image of reality that is ultimately equal: these films approximate reality but never reach it. While “pseudorealism”, for Bazin, aims simply at duplicating the world outside, integral realism aims at creating an image of the world that moves beyond individual expression. While lens-based capture, according to Bazin, re-presents reality to us, it also allows us to move beyond the concrete, to the larger historical and structural context. In *Tonsler Park* the images of the election officers’ faces move beyond their evidential quality. Watching the people steadily performing their jobs, our thoughts wander off: to the future outcome of the election (not yet known to the people on the screen), the senseless killing of black lives through by police brutality, the historical struggle for African American voting rights, the contrast between this quotidian scenery and the stereotypical racist representations of blackness as violence (cf. hooks 2015; Butler 1993; Reynolds 2010), or the gendered and racialized dimensions of this type of manual, repetitive labour. None of these themes are induced directly into the film by Everson. In fact, any possible symbolism seems to be undercut, except from perhaps the folding of the American flags at the beginning and the very end of the film and the inclusion of a Halloween poster in the background of one of the last shots, alluding to the election’s tragic outcome.

As Alexandra Oliver argues, the reappearance of realism in contemporary art differs from classical notions of realism-as-adequacy (that any representation, to count as realistic, must have some kind of secure correspondence to its object) (Oliver 2014, 10). Rather, Oliver claims, contemporary realist practices subscribe to an understanding of realism as difference (Oliver 2014, 10). Following the logic of Adorno’s identity-thinking (the process of categorical thought in modern society whereby we “identify” an object as a such-and-such we when encounter it), Oliver argues that our categorizations never exhaust the objects we conceive: “a part of the object is missing for the subject” (Oliver 2014, 13). Thus, she claims:
Accepting the inevitability of the world’s partial concealment, its excess and ultimate unknowability also entails embracing its partial knowability, its plenitude, its perpetual unconcealment. Discarding the dream of objectivity need not therefore entail a hopeless capitulation to fiction and fantasy. (Oliver 2014, 13–14)

In their approach to the real, these contemporary observational practices embody this form of critical realism. For cinema, I will argue, this notion of a realism, conceived as merely consistent with reality, is parallel to Bazin’s notion of integral realism. Neither of these films assert any direct and immediate relationship between cinema and reality. In line with the new empiricism and feminist objectivity outlined by Haraway, these contemporary observational practices start with the acknowledgement that objectivity is always partial and situated; objectivity can never be objective. Accepting the ultimate unknowability and embracing its partial knowability, its plenitude and perpetual unconcealment, the new realism seeks to represent the real in ways that are attuned to the empirical world while remaining aware that its representations are always partial and fragmented. Rather than to despair and embrace uncertainty as the only epistemological strategy, these works consider the ways in which the incompleteness of knowledge is structured and try to present a less destructive way of relating to the empirical world and those around us. With a confident awareness of their own meditation, these films create aesthetic representations of reality that converge with our perceptual experience with reality in ways that, I believe, exemplify Bazin’s notion of integral realism: the production of a filmic reality which is different, but ontologically equal to the empirical reality, which gives rise to new ways of understanding our world.

Together, I believe that films like Leviathan and Tonsler Park testify to the importance of rehabilitating observation in our current moment. In a time when the
assertion of the indiscernibility between fact and fiction has been appropriated by discourses of power, the manifestations of the world need our attention and care more than our suspicion. Rather than to reiterate the engrained idea that we cannot believe what we see, these films ask us to look closer at a world that needs witnessing; they present the world to our attention and, as Bazin would suggest, consequently to our love\textsuperscript{[15]} (Bazin 2005a, 15).

**Filmography**


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In his article, Greene describes a sudden rise of formally reflexive and performative documentary practices that seem to mirror the precarious status of truth epitomized by the rise of post-truth politics (Greene 2017). Among these films is Greene’s own Kate Plays Christine (2016), a documentary-thriller about the actress Kate Lyn Sheil re-enacting the life of the news anchor Christine Chubbuck in the months leading up to Chubbuck’s on-air suicide.

Throughout this essay, I use the term lens-based capture to refer to image-making technologies that use lenses to record images, i.e. photography (digital and analogue), video and film. I will mainly refer to lens-based capture rather than the concept of photographic or cinematic indexicality as, within media theoretic discourses, the concept of indexicality has come to represent the essential difference between analogue and digital photography or cinema (Doane 2007, 2; Dubois 2016, 160; Mitchell 1992; Manovich 2002; Ritchin 1990).

Grierson’s review of Robert Flaherty’s Moana in N.Y. Sun on February 8th 1926 has been designated as the first public use of the word “documentary” with reference to film. In his review, Grierson writes: “Moana’, being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth and his family, has documentary value” (Grierson in Druick and Williams 2014, 16).

In Introduction to documentary, Nichols revises his taxonomy to include a poetic mode and a performative mode (Nichols 2017, 108)

According to Nichols, a cursory history of documentary representation begins with the expository mode which is succeeded by the observational mode that abandons the formal and didactic construction of the previous mode in favour of a spontaneous observation of lived experience. The observational mode is followed by the interactive mode (later renamed the participatory mode), whereby the textual authority shifts from the process of recording to the social actors recruited in the film.

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With the rise of postmodernism, the interactive mode is then replaced by the reflexive mode (Nichols 1991, 32–33).

[6] However, as early ethnographic films like Nanook of the North (Flaherty 1922) illustrate, the documentary’s claim to truth and authenticity has never been straightforward (see e.g. Nichols 1991, 201–28).

[7] In an article in Sight&Sound titled “Observation and Identity”, Roger Sandall introduces the term “observational” to describe a certain kind of documentary that focuses on the empirical, the concrete and the specific – something which stands in opposition to what he calls “interpretive cinema” (Sandall 1972). In a similar vein Christopher Pinney has noted how the indexical capacities of photographic presented photography (and later film) as a utopian anthropological document: “a vitrine filled with illustrative evidence” (Pinney 2016, 22).

[8] I borrow the notion of a “bad object” from Erika Balsom’s article “From Bad Object to Lost Object: The Desires of Film Theory” in Spectator 27. In this article, Balsom frames her discussion around Christian Metz’s conception of the relationship between theorist and cinema as “love object”. The “bad object” / “lost object” pair references the psychoanalysis of Melanie Klein which Balsom does not engage directly with in her article, but which informs Metz’s discussions in “The Imaginary Signifier” (Metz 2000).


[10] For criticisms of Latour’s argument see e.g.(Keller 2017; Fleissner 2017; Foster 2015; Felski 2011.))

The American philosopher Daniel Dennett has stated that: “what the postmodernists did was truly evil”, blaming “them” for “the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts” (Dennet in Cadwalladr 2017). Despite the seeming controversy of Dennett’s essentializing allegation, he is not the only one who has pointed a finger of blame for the “post-truth” era of politics at postmodernism and poststructuralism (Scruton 2017; Calcutt 2016). On the basis of these propositions, London School of Economics arranged a philosophical forum in 2017 titled: “Is Post-Modernism to Blame for our Post-Truth World?” (London School of Economics and Political Science 2017).

Here, Latour makes a reference to a claim made by Jean Baudrillard that The World Trade Center in fact imploded under their own weight, undermined by the nihilism inherent in modern capitalism (Latour 2004, 228).

In “Observation and Identity”, Sandall emphasizes that to observe involves a close attendance to the world while resisting the desire to control, circumscribe or appropriate it (Sandall 1972).

A note on further reading: The framing of the registration of the world as a practice of love is an attitude that shares aspects of Eve Sedgwick’s notion of reparative reading (Sedgwick 2003). In opposition to paranoid reading, Sedgwick describes reparative reading as a critical practice that seeks to repair damage and move beyond negative affects. I believe that an interrogation of Sedgwick’s critical practice in the context of this field of inquiry can provide further fruitful insight to the rehabilitation of observational modes in contemporary documentary practises.