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## LISTENING THROUGH THE EYE. REFLECTIONS ON THE DIALOGICAL ASPECTS OF DOCUMENTARY

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# Introduction

On October 20, 2022, Professor W. J. T. Mitchell delivered the inaugural keynote speech during the first academic seminar hosted by the nascent Visual Culture research group of the University of Palermo at Palazzo Steri. The speech was titled “Seeing Through Madness” and presented some of the themes of W. J. T. Mitchell’s ongoing research at the American Institute in Rome. Mitchell opened his talk with a passage from William Blake’s *Auguries of Innocence* (1803) where Blake challenges the reader to see beyond the mystifying power of images, or, in Blake’s words, to learn to see through the eye rather than with it.

“This life’s dim windows of the soul  
Distorts the heavens from pole to pole  
And leads you to believe a lie  
When you see with, not through, the eye”  
*Auguries of Innocence, William Blake, 1803*

In: Rossetti, W. M. (ed.) *Poems of William Blake*. London: Macmillan, pp. 219–221.

Blake’s “windows of the soul” are our senses or perceptions, specifically the eyes. By referring to them as “dim windows”, Blake not only suggests that the eyes frame reality by selecting portions of the real, but also that their capacity to see is dim or clouded, meaning our view of reality is distorted or limited by our physical, subjective and situated experience of life. The “heavens” symbolise spiritual truths or divine reality, which are misrepresented or obscured by our earthly perceptions. Blake suggests that relying solely on sensory experience (“seeing with the eye”) can lead to a distorted understanding of reality, causing one to “believe a lie”. Instead, Blake advocates for a deeper, more intuitive form of perception (“seeing through the eye”), one that distrusts vision as a reliable tool for the seeker of truth, or at least, a modality of seeing that is fully aware of its inherent, insurmountable limitations. In Mitchell’s elaboration, Blake’s verses encourage the reader to seek beyond what images directly show; to look further than what they appear to make visible.<sup>1</sup> For Mitchell, seeing

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell’s reflections are based on Mitchell’s close examination of the work of William Blake as a multidimensional artist who mastered the art of poetry as much as that of painting and drawing, creating unprecedented publications that merged text, pictures, layout and designs in strikingly

through something means to carry out an undisciplined retaliation that calls for deeper investigations to unmask the illusionary, opaque or shadowy real in images; to expose them beyond their superficial layer of alleged transparency or simplicity; see, for instance, Mitchell's discovery and definition of meta-pictures (Mitchell, 2017). For Visual Culture scholars, Blake's exhortation translates into a call to decode images within their *scopic regimes*, that is to see images in relation to the historical and cultural contexts in which they are released and retrace their atemporal meanings; to contest images in relation to the apparatuses that mediate it; and to consider how the gaze adds to the complexity of this intricate web of relations (Cometa, 2020; Jay, 1988).

While vision relies on biological mechanisms, perception is shaped by personal, cultural, and historical filters. Furthermore, seeing is a bodily act, where the body is part of the world it perceives. And finally, emotional states and personal experiences influence vision, meaning that consciousness and subjectivity are integral to seeing. Let's consider for instance the ways in which the gaze is directed by attention, which varies from individual to individual in terms of power and extension, as much as being influenced by the identity, emotions, memory, as well as cultural and historical assumptions; these elements influence the gaze, and vice versa. While the thinking mind tends to picture the gaze as a unidirectional laser, it is actually more similar to a fluid, mutable, and unstable stream of perceptions that dynamically engage with others as well as with all other elements present in the ecosystem that embraces the gazer. It follows that, if vision might be described as a dialogical process, seeing through the eyes also implies looking further than the individual dimension of the gaze, and exploring its intersubjective dynamics.

How do we learn to see through vision and why might it be necessary to do so in the contemporary world? What is the role of authorial documentary film and photography in regards to this? One of the defining traits of modern society is the growing awareness that our species' very survival is at risk; amid the escalating political, social, and economic uncertainty that this awareness produces, images play a crucial role—not just as omnipresent visuals in a hyper-circulated media landscape but as active forces shaping reality, the perception of truth, and the human mind. Because of their uniquely close and complex relationship with truth, reality, and contemporaneity, authorial documentary cinema lies at the centre of these relations. At the same time, the rise of virtual realities and AI-driven visual

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innovative ways (Mitchell, 1978); see, for instance: Blake, W. (1790–1793) *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Available at: William Blake Archive. Available at: <https://blakearchive.org>. Last accessed: February 2025.

systems deepen our interdependence with visuality and with new visual technologies, making it essential to understand these evolving relationships, and their ethical implications. This calls into question the role of cinema of the real within the contemporary landscape that encompasses both traditional and new visual media. In regards to these preoccupations, Dottorini, after critically engaging with Agamben's reflections on contemporaneity in his seminal essay *Che cos'è il contemporaneo?* (Agamben, 2008, pp. 29-44), argues: "Discussing cinema of the real means breaking away from the media system to adopt an *untimely* position—one that is, paradoxically, profoundly contemporary" (Dottorini, 2019, p. 12, author's translation).<sup>2</sup> According to Agamben, "The contemporary is a unique relationship with one's own time—one that both adheres to it and, at the same time, distances itself from it. More precisely, it is a relationship with time that clings to it through a displacement and an anachronism." (Agamben, 2008, p. 32, author's translation).<sup>3</sup> In describing the contemporary men, Agamben's words resonate with a possible description for the documentary film author, which would align with the discourse here introduced: "The contemporary is not only the one who, in perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps its inextinguishable light; they are also the one who, by dividing and interpolating time, can transform it and connect it with other times, reading history in an unprecedented way, 'quoting' it according to a necessity that does not stem from their own will, but from a demand they cannot help but answer." (Agamben, 2008, p. 43, author's translation).<sup>4</sup>

Throughout this work, with cinema of the real, creative documentary films or documentary images, we refer to authorial documentary cinema and photography, that is visual works that stem from the subjective and artistic research journey of authors, and their close relationship with the real. Many of the considerations in this work, however, challenge the existence of a divide between images of the real and fictional representations. As Dottorini argued in *La passione del reale. Il documentario o creazione del mondo*, cinema was originally born from the dual urge to represent reality and to reinvent it, two inextricably interlinked driving

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<sup>2</sup> Dottorini wrote: "Parlare di cinema del reale significa dunque svincolarsi dal sistema dei media per assumere una posizione inattuale e dunque profondamente contemporanea." (Dottorini, 2019, p. 12).

<sup>3</sup> Agamben wrote: "La contemporaneità è, cioè, una singolare relazione col proprio tempo, che aderisce a esso e, insieme, ne prende le distanze; più precisamente, essa è quella relazione col tempo che aderisce a esso attraverso una sfasatura e un anacronismo." (Agamben, 2008, p. 32).

<sup>4</sup> Agamben wrote: "il contemporaneo non è soltanto colui che, percependo il buio del presente, ne afferra l'inesitabile luce; è anche colui che, dividendo e interpolando il tempo, è in grado di trasformarlo e di metterlo in relazione con gli altri tempi, di leggerne in modo inedito la storia, di "citarla" secondo una necessità che non proviene in alcun modo dal suo arbitrio, ma da un'esigenza a cui egli non può non rispondere." (Agamben, 2008, p. 43).

forces. To sum up on the weaknesses of a rigid divide, when film scholar Erika Balsom provocatively asked filmmaker and film scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha, why she stated that “there is no such a thing as documentary”, she replied “categories always overlap. I wrote ‘there is no such thing as documentary’ because it’s illusory to take the real and reality for granted and to think that a neutral language exists, even though we often strive for such neutrality in our scholarly work. To use an image is to enter fiction” (Balsom, 2018 b). For these reasons, as Dottorini proposes, it may be useful to discuss “documentarian gazes” as well as documentary cinema; that is, gazes that honour the necessity to represent “traces of testimonies” (Dottorini, 2019, p.12, author’s translation). As we suggest in this work, exploring “documentarian forms” might be as fruitful. Since more often than not, documentary images portray real people living their lives, rather than professional actors reciting scripted fiction, a prominent aspect of documentary forms is their ethical dimension, which, as we explore further in this work, is called to respond to different and sometimes conflicting ethical necessities, such as the need for fair representations of the lives of witnesses, the right of audiences to access truthful depictions of reality, and the subjective aspirations of the image-makers to remain true to their artistic vision (Aufderheide, Jaszi, and Chandra, 2009). Rather than seeking definite answers on the relations between ethics and aesthetics in documentary images, the pages that follow explore if and how authors can honour otherness and reality while creating relevant and meaningful representations; these explorations are carried out by investigating the visible traces of a hypothetical ethics of aesthetics in documentary forms.

As they simultaneously document and represent aspects of the real, not only do documentary forms influence the spectator by raising awareness, educating, and provoking thought; or function as an extensions of the mind, as private fortresses of memories or collective containers of testimonies; they are also powerful mediums to “see through” vision, expose the mystifying potential of images, and foster the ability to understand reality beyond what is subjectively visible through one’s own “dim windows”. As we explore in this thesis, other than showing sections of truth and reality, as well as new *ways of seeing* otherness and life, and consequently fostering ways to attune to and understand otherness, documentary forms might make visible in their cinematic and photographic forms the unique ways of relating between otherness, the I that gazes on it, truth, reality, time, space, the chosen apparatus, other images, the environment around the scene, as well as the interactions between the various dimensions of meanings that these relationships generate.

As the title implies, rather than proposing a classification or catalogue of documentary forms, or definite answers to their relationship to reality and subjectivity, this work presents itself as an organised collection of reflections on the themes introduced above; a montage of explorations that is meant to show, not tell (Benjamin, 2000 in Dottorini, 2019, pp. 31-32, author's translation); a collage of multidisciplinary explorations in dialogue with one another. The goal and challenge of the work proposed here is to let meaning emerge from the discussion of a number of specific documentary forms in documentary cinema, in dialogue with heterogeneous visual materials of the real, such as documentary shorts, experimental film, nonfiction photo-texts and literature, and photography. The dialogical aspects of these documentary forms are explored through three concepts/documentary operations-multidimensionality, synchronicity and exotopy. In order to introduce the reasoning behind them, consider the cover image of this work: the image-maker captured a tree and cloud in perfect alignment, combining reality with their imaginative vision. The image has many dimensions: is both real and invented, subjective and objective, showing what is, what could be, and what the creator imagined and saw. It also hints at an image beyond the frame (a flourishing tree), shaped by synchronic elements, such as the timing in which the tree and the cloud meet the gaze of the image-maker, and orchestrated by the author's attuned gaze, which is in the real and simultaneously outside of it. The three documentary processes mapped in this work however are determinations of what some specific documentary forms do, not preconceived notions of what documentaries should do or mean.

In summary, through this work, we introduce and explore three key concepts: the listening gaze, a specific gaze that occurs at a listening distance between camera and reality, close to what film scholar Sarah Cooper described as a "respectful distance" (Cooper, 2010, p. 64), while Vivian Sobchack framed it as "ethical gaze" (Sobchack, 2004, pp. 226-257); synchronic filmic forms, which Morin described as filmic telepathy (Morin, 2003); and exotopic filmic forms, built on the reflections on exotopy originated from the reflections on Michail Bakhtin's reflections on the relationship between the author and the hero in aesthetic activity (Bakhtin, 1990; Bakhtin, 2000; Todorov, 1995).

Once introduced in the theoretical chapter *In the world, not about it. Dialogical aspects of documentary*, these three concepts are applied to documentary images in the respective chapters: *Multidimensional truths. Representing the real*; *Connecting synchronicities. Attuning to the real*; and *Exotopic forms. Honouring the real*. Multidimensionality, synchronicity and exotopy are not presented as mutually exclusive qualities, but as

declinations of dialogic aspects that inhabit the forms of images. Like in an archeological excavation, the analysis starts from the most accessible aspect- multidimensionality, and moves deeper to the other two. The section *Physical and metaphysical positioning of the author. Transfiguring the real* discusses how the positioning of authors with respect to the real shapes images, given that the point of view of the author of this thesis is one of a documentary filmmaker. Our filmic work is discussed in the chapter *Notes from the field. Beyond participation: towards a listening positioning*, which explores the dialogic aspects of documentary by reflecting on the direct, hands-on experience of making documentary films through the analysis of the completed feature documentary *Aylesbury Estate* (2020), and the visual research journey that is leading to the documentary film *Listening Centres*, which is close to completion at the time of writing this introduction. Documentary film practice, particularly when approached as self-reflective research by researchers who are also image-makers, offers a rich and innovative methodology that moves beyond self-referential discourse. While art-based research is well-established in British-American contexts, in other academic traditions, it can be undervalued by using it simply as a tool for presenting findings rather than a research method in its own right. However, art-based research positions the production of visual works not as mere objects of study but as integral to the research process, influencing and generating new hypotheses and insights (Barone and Eisner, 2012).

## Prologue. The obsession with form

In the Jefferson Lecture of 2018 titled “To see the suffering: the humanities have what medicine needs”, Rita Charon compared Hiroshi Sugimoto’s photograph *Marmara Sea, Silivli* (1991) with Mark Rothko’s painting *Green, Blue, Brown* (1952) to highlight the capacity of images—documentary or otherwise—to exceed their denotative function and enter the realm of metaphor and perception (Charon, 2018). In Sugimoto’s iconic black and white photograph, the horizon’s line divides and connects the sea of Marmara, of an uncanny concrete gray, and the sky, empty and pale. There is nothing else; the horizon, a concept that is neither exclusively abstract nor exclusively concrete, but both together, caught though a precise representation of a particular place and time, transforms under the viewer’s gaze, becoming a site of personal projection. Some may see the vastness of possibility; others may perceive emptiness or unidentifiable absence. Rothko’s painting, despite seemingly lacking a tangible referent, produces a similar effect, constructing a dialogue between abstraction and materiality; its horizontal lines may be associated with imaginary horizons, that also divide and connect the visible by forming rectangles of colour. Charon’s comparison shows not only that the boundary between representation and imagination is fluid, but also that visual form not only represents but also evokes content, playing a crucial role in both shaping and triggering meaning. The fact that one image is an abstract painting, while the other is a documentary photograph, goes into the background. As Paul Klee wrote about the relationship between visible and invisible, reality and imagination, “In the past, visible things were represented on earth. (...) Today the relativity of visible things is made manifest, and with this we give expression to the belief that, with respect to the universe, the visible constitutes only an isolated example and that there exist, latent, much more numerous truths” (Klee, 2004, p. 18, author’s translation).<sup>5</sup> Charon’s discourse also poses questions on form as a result of the author’s physical and meta-physical positioning in the real. The two images, in their reflexive dimension, that is what they reveal of the author’s gaze, show a similar

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<sup>5</sup> Translated from: “Oggi la relatività delle cose visibili è resa manifesta, e con ciò si dà espressione al convincimento che, rispetto all’universo, il visibile costituisca solo un esempio isolato e che esistano, latenti, ben più numerose verità”. (Klee, 2004, p. 18).

perspective on the world, one that is interested in capturing visible and invisible boundaries like horizons. Like the point of view, the physical positioning of both authors in relation to the real they represented appears to be similar; if the authors had an horizon in mind, either imaginative or real, they saw it in a similar way, from a similar distance; both images seem to give life to a similar way of seeing and thinking horizons, and in turn, similar horizons are made visible in the images. As Cezanne explained: “The landscape becomes humanised, reflects itself, and thinks within me. I am the subjective consciousness of this landscape, and my canvas is its objective consciousness. Both my canvas and the landscape exist outside of me, yet the latter is chaotic, random, confused, devoid of logical life or any rationality, while the former is enduring, categorized, and partakes in the mode of ideas.”(Cezanne in Ferrari, 2015, p. 113, author’s translation).<sup>6</sup>

A similar interplay between form, perception, and meaning emerges in the recurring representation of gleaners across three distinct documentary forms: Agnès Varda’s *The Gleaners and I* (original title «Les glaneurs et la glaneuse», 2000), Dorothea Lange’s *Filipino Lettuce Workers*, and Jean-François Millet’s *The Gleaners* («Le glaneurs», 1857). While Lange documents a moment of economic struggle and Millet honours peasant labor, Varda extends the concept of gleaning to the act of filmmaking itself, positioning herself as a gatherer of images and narratives; even though they use different apparatuses (film, photography and painting), and consequently aesthetic strategies, these representations all show a small group of humble workers bent over a field as they laboriously collect waste from a larger agricultural production from which they were excluded; yet the similarities extend beyond subject matter to a shared approach: an observational distance that maintains intimacy, a realism that resists overt stylisation, and a perspective that grants dignity to marginalised subjects. In *The Gleaners*, Millet glorifies peasant labor, portraying three women hunched over a sunlit field, collecting remnants of the wheat harvest. His painting honors their existence with a realism that, though carefully composed, resists idealization. Through the painting Millet, who comes from a family of peasants and becomes a spokesman for their suffering, honours the existence and the resistance of the rural world. Similarly, some of Dorothea Lange’s photographs, such as *Filipino Lettuce Pickers* (1939), depict

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<sup>6</sup> Translated from: “Il paesaggio si umanizza, si riflette e pensa in me. Io sono la coscienza soggettiva di questo paesaggio e la mia tela ne è la coscienza oggettiva. La mia tela e il paesaggio, l’una e l’altro al di fuori di me, ma il secondo caotico, casuale, confuso, senza vita logica, senza qualsiasi razionalità; la prima duratura, categorizzata, partecipe della modalità delle idee.” (Cezanne in Ferrari, 2015, p. 113).

agricultural laborers bent over arid fields, their postures echoing those of Millet's gleaners. Both Millet and Lange represent their real life experiences. Like in Millet and Varda's images, Lange's focus is not on the faces of the gleaners; all three authors recognise that gleaners are strongly related to their social systems that both support and marginalise them. However, Lange's focus is more prominently oriented towards the broader systemic conditions that produce economic hardship and social isolation. Her compositions frame workers within vast agricultural landscapes, sometimes including farming machinery in the background, subtly documenting the industrialization of American agriculture and its disregard for both laborers and the land.

A gleaner of images of rural life, Dorothea Lange was one of America's most significant documentary photographers. During the Great Depression, she captured the lives of marginalized rural workers, many of whom were literal and figurative gleaners. Some described her as an "agricultural sociologist" (Gordon, 2006, p. 698), while others saw her work as "pulsing with moral passion" (Coles, 1982, p. 8). Lange's biography has often been linked to her photographic gaze. As a child, she contracted polio, leaving her with a lifelong limp, and at twelve, her father abandoned the family. Scholars like Curtis (1995) and Mignano (2022) argue that these experiences shaped her deep affinity for those facing physical, emotional, and social hardships. Lange herself acknowledged the profound impact of illness on her work, stating, "I think it was perhaps the most important thing that happened to me. [It] formed me, guided me, instructed me, helped me, and humiliated me. All those things at once" (Coles, 1982, p. 10). However, as Gordon notes, Lange was not only an empathetic observer but also a rigorous visual researcher. Her Farming Service Agency (FSA) assignments demonstrated an unmatched depth of engagement—she traveled extensively and developed sharper insights, aided by her second husband, an agricultural economist and FSA insider (Gordon, 2006).<sup>7</sup>

Varda's *The Gleaners and I* extends this legacy by intertwining gleaning with filmmaking itself. Identifying with Millet's humble peasants, like Lange, Varda also embarks on a long

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<sup>7</sup> As Gordon discusses, Lange was employed as a documentary photographer by the Farming Service Agency (FSA), which was the most progressive end of the American Department for Agriculture (it was created in 1935 as an autonomous bureau that promoted New Deal policies). During the years of the Great Depression, the FSA promoted a groundbreaking photography project in order to conduct a visual inquiry upon the socio-economic relations in rural America; the project lasted until 1942 and produced hundreds of images. At the time the American agricultural political economy, and in particular agricultural labour, were based on hidden rigid racial systems. The photographic project had the objective of exposing these systems, for instance by bringing to light that most agricultural workers in the western regions were people of colour and migrants (Gordon, 2006).

visual research journey, a road trip through France, to document contemporary gleaners—urban scavengers, artists repurposing waste, and activists challenging consumer culture. Like Lange and Millet, Varda positions herself at an observational and yet engaged distance, using a handheld digital camera to mirror the humility of her subjects. In one sequence, she films potato gleaners in a vast field, her framing and camera movements evoking the rhythmic gestures of Lange's laborers and Millet's peasants.

All three representations invite a reflection on the relationship between fragments and the whole. Every image is both a fragment of reality and, in turn, a self-contained whole when considered in relation to other omitted images—those left out of the final form- the drafts or the discarded photographs or footage. This process of selection is inherently subjective, shaped by an authorial gaze that distinguishes between what is included and what remains unseen, thereby establishing a hierarchy of meaning. This suggests that images are traces of the real, while visual perceptions are pieces of subjective experiences of reality which are fragments of universal truth. Image-making is ultimately an act of exclusion—first through framing, then through editing—but also an act of recovery, a form of gleaning in which the maker excavates lost or overlooked fragments, bringing them into visibility.

The affinity between these three works is not only thematic and apparent in the recurring themes, scenarios, contexts and gestures, but also formal. In *The Gleaners*, *Filipino Lettuce Pickers*, and Varda's film, the camera (or painter's gaze) assumes a horizontal positioning in relation to the subjects, neither towering above nor looking up at them. This creates a "listening distance" that respects the autonomy of the gleaners while acknowledging their precarious status. All three authors position themselves close enough to catch the effortful gestures of the witnesses, yet far enough so that their presence is not perceived as intrusive by the pickers and the spectator alike. None of these images sentimentalise or exploit their subjects; instead, they establish a visual dialogue between human labor and the landscapes that both sustain and oppress it. Thanks to the authors' attunement to the world around them, in their representations the environment becomes a resounding speaker of the human condition of workers, and vice versa, the workers' appearance mirrors that of their environment. In *Filipino Lettuce Pickers* for instance, Lange captures the bodies of lettuce pickers, particularly their legs and arms, in a fluid, swaying motion that mimics the waverly shape of lettuces. One could argue that Lange studies with precisions foreign movements, that she would have not been able to perform because of her claudicant leg; the lettuce pickers, lettuce, fields, the clumps in the foreground of the image, Lange, her limp, and

America during the Great Depression are all strangely connected by invisible strings, and these heterogeneous elements converge in a photograph that aims at making them visible, by documenting, creating and revealing them at the same time. Varda openly quotes Millet in her film; did Lange also pay homage to the realist painter? as Davey (2020) noted with regards to Lange's photographs, evidence to demonstrate that she had seen Millet's painting are yet to be found; however, Lange's references to Millet's painting were likely intentional, as *The Gleaners* was widely reproduced in inexpensive lithographs decorating working-class homes and public spaces in early 20th-century America (Stein, 1994). This suggests a continuity of visual memory, where documentary images—whether painted, photographed, or filmed—do not merely record reality but mediate a historical and aesthetic lineage. This raises further questions about the fine line between staging and capturing reality. Did Millet paint an exact scene he witnessed? Did Lange deliberately compose her subjects to echo Millet's representation, or did she recognise and document a familiar gesture shaped by historical continuity? And how did Varda's presence shape the reality she sought to show in her film? Suppose Lange instructed her subjects to adopt Millet's iconic pose—bending forward with outstretched arms. Their movements, shaped by lived experience, would still feel natural. Conversely, even if Lange merely observed and photographed the workers in action, her presence—a limping woman adjusting heavy equipment in an open field—would inevitably influence the unfolding of events. Consider for instance how Lange's *Filipino Lettuce Pickers* might be not just a reflection of reality but a rediscovery of a form—a structure pre-existing in the author's artistic consciousness, yet found in the world; a projection that might not be limited to the artist, but that might extend to the spectator. How does the viewer's own gaze, shaped by personal and cultural references, alter the interpretation of these images? The distance at which the creator/viewer positions themselves with respect to the real and its representations become of crucial significance. In filmmaking, this interval has somewhat less defined boundaries. As Benjamin wrote on the difference between paintings and cinema: "In his work, the painter observes from a natural distance from what is given to him, while the operator penetrates deeply into the fabric of a situation. The images they produce are vastly different: the painter's image is total, whereas the operator's image is variably fragmented, with its parts assembling according to a new law." (Benjamin, 2014, p. 26, author's translation).<sup>8</sup> It follows that "the nature that speaks to the camera is different from

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<sup>8</sup> Translated from: "Nel suo lavoro, il pittore osserva a una distanza naturale da ciò che gli è dato, l'operatore invece penetra profondamente nel tessuto di una situazione. Le immagini che entrambi ottengono, sono enormemente diverse. Quella del pittore è un'immagine totale, quella dell'operatore è

the one that speaks to the eye” or rather, to the “optical unconscious”, given that the real engages in dialogue with the author's consciousness and vision, just as representation engages in dialogue with the viewer's consciousness and vision. (Benjamin, 2014, p. 30- 31, author's translation). As Maurice Merleau-Ponty later elaborates, perception is shaped by both external stimuli and an “interior gaze”—a synthesis of memory, imagination, and lived experience; in his words, an image: “does not grant the spirit an opportunity to rethink the constitutive relationships among things; rather, it invites the gaze to unite them—the traces of an inner vision—and provides the vision with that which lines its interior, its imaginary structure of the real. We might then say that there is an inner gaze, a third eye that sees both the paintings and the mental images, just as has been spoken of a third eye that apprehends the messages of the external through the noise they stir within us.”(Merleau-Ponty, 1989, p. 22, author's translation).<sup>9</sup> As Didi-Huberman warns, however, the space between iconoclastic tendencies and a blind faith in documentary truth is traces a horizon of possibilities; both rejecting images as mere constructs, as well as revering them as manifestations of truth, mean missing the crucial point; in his words: “there was a time, no doubt, when the indexicality criterion and the Barthesian *Ça a été* [it-has-been/it-was] were abused. Every time we looked at a photograph, we spoke of ontology, consequently neglecting the formal procedures specific to this medium. But to opt for the diametrically opposed point of view is to trade the *all* for the *nothing*, which means losing sight of photographic power itself, as well as the (problematic) point where *the image touches the real*. ” (Didi-Hubermann, 2008, p. 70).

Ultimately, documentary images are both documents and interpretations—simultaneously evidentiary and expressive. Their power lies not in resolving the tension between reality and representation but in exploring the dialogue between them. In the brief discussion above we attempted to introduce the idea that documentary form is not merely a neutral vessel but an active force that structures ethical and aesthetic relations between filmmaker, subject, and spectator; this reflection animates this work. Documentary images, however, are primarily framed by subject matter, not aesthetic form (Dixon and Haste, 2014); content- what images

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variamente frammentata, le cui parti si compongono secondo una legge nuova” (Benjamin, 2014, p. 26).

<sup>9</sup> Translated from: “non offre allo spirito un'occasione di ripensare i rapporti tra le cose, ma offre piuttosto allo sguardo affinché esso le sposi, le tracce della visione dall'interno, e alla visione ciò che la foderà interiormente, la struttura immaginaria del reale. Diremo allora che c'è uno sguardo dell'interno, un terzo occhio che vede i quadri ed anche le immagini mentali, così come si è parlato di un terzo occhio che coglie i messaggi dell'esterno attraverso il rumore che sollevano in noi?” (Merleau-Ponty, 1989, p. 22).

show of the real- is largely redeemed more influential than context - how they were made, what relationships, beliefs and values guided them. And yet, the ethics of aesthetics in images is deeply intertwined with form. The structure of an image—its composition, framing, and depth—determines not only how reality is represented but also how it is perceived, interpreted, and remembered. They are not just records of events but constructions that reveal the intellectual, emotional, and ethical positioning of their authors. One of the key ethical concerns in documentary photography and filmmaking is representation—how subjects are portrayed and how these portrayals shape public understanding. As seen in Lange's work, the focus on physical gestures and body language rather than facial expressions shifts attention from individual identity to the broader socio-economic system that governs labor conditions. This formal choice resists the temptation to create heroic narratives and instead emphasizes structural inequalities. Similarly, Millet's *The Gleaners* abstracts his subjects into universal figures of peasant labor, while Varda's digital camerawork mirrors the scavenging act itself, reinforcing her thematic exploration of waste and survival. This tension between aesthetics and ethics is also evident in the relationship between the filmmaker and the witness. This is particularly relevant in the case of images that document suffering- should they evoke empathy, compassion, shock, or analytical detachment? Should they cater to the viewer's voyeurism? The ethical challenge lies in maintaining a balance between truthful representation and the potential exploitation of suffering for aesthetic or ideological purposes. In our interpretation of Blake's take on vision, the first step to perceive the real "through the eye", is to focus on form over content. Documentary image-making could be described as the art of experimenting with visual form- an expression that includes the technical and aesthetic dimensions of images, and at the same time it indicates something of a different nature. The form of an image refers to its structure or composition, including its shape, size, colours, texture, and other visual elements, and can be analysed in terms of its technical qualities, such as framing, perspective, and lighting, as well as its narrative or informational content. Rather than considering any element in particular through a vertical approach, examining the form of an image encompasses how all the various visual and narrative elements come together to create a coherent whole which is the result of intricate relations between its different components and dimensions; on the other hand, aesthetics can be subjective and vary depending on the cultural and historical context in which an image is created and viewed. The form precedes, includes and exceeds the aesthetic dimension of images: there cannot be aesthetics without form, and looking at the form might make it possible to analyse images

across different contexts and epochs. In documentary making, form might make visible more than just a series of technical, creative and narrative decisions; it might, for instance, expose other contextual elements, such as the nature of the relationship between authors and witnesses, the way both view the world and each other, as well as the intentions of authors, their inner *why*; in other words, form might reveal the ethical positioning of authors; not just their way of seeing the real, but their way of existing in it; likewise, it might show how they exist in relation to their witnesses, and vice versa; hence, looking at form might illuminate some of the questions around the tension between ethics and aesthetics in documentary, which demand an ethical engagement from their creators and viewers, as they operate at the intersection of subjective interpretation and objective testimony.

**In the world, not about it.**

**Dialogical aspects of documentary**

# 1. Dialogues of images, images as dialogues

The questions on ethics and documentary posed in the prologue are informed by the work of filmmakers/photographers who dared to capture aspects of human suffering in a way that felt challenging to society, and by scholars who looked at representations of the unspeakable. Sebastião Salgado photographed famine, war, and genocide. Gianfranco Rosi filmed the dead bodies of migrants outside Lampedusa in his award-winning documentary film *Fire at Sea* (original title: «*Fuocoammare*», 2016). Friederick Wiseman filmed unsettling sequences of vulnerable patients being abused in a social institution in *Titicut Follies* (1959). Was their work necessary, urgent, permissible or even honourable, or did it contribute to altering what the spectator has the right to observe when drawn to appeal to the voyeuristic tendencies of the morbid eye? Director Krzysztof Kieślowski abandoned documentary practice because of its unethical nature, which, in his view, invites the filmmaker to push the boundaries beyond decency in the pursuit of stories (Kieślowski and Stok, 1993). Director Alice Rohrwacher, during the 2024 masterclass on the loose boundary between documentary and fiction cinema at the 62° Festival dei Popoli in Florence recalled how she transitioned from documentary to fiction because in her experience of filmmaking, in documentary, people are prisoners of their identity, whereas in fiction they are free to wear an elective, fictional mask. Guerra argued that some representations of the Shoah derive their power from the “pressure of the off-screen” and its power to evoke the experience of emptiness, questioning the moral and political relationship between the viewer’s gaze and the contemplation of the extreme; in Guerra’s views, visual culture must defend the “cause of the invisible” and rethink the very foundation of what we are given access to see, and why (Guerra, 2020, pp. 9-19, author’s translation).

Some scholars have also identified an inherent power imbalance between documentary authors and their witnesses (Nichols, 2014; Piotrowska, 2012). Nichols’ framework of documentary processes explores how stylistic choices shape ethical considerations and the dynamics between filmmakers and their subjects. He posits that each documentary approach establishes a distinct ethical foundation, influencing the power relationships embedded within representation. According to Nichols, the inherent imbalance in documentary filmmaking

stems from the director's control over narrative construction, privileged access to financial and technical resources, editorial authority, and decision-making power regarding distribution. To address this disparity, he advocates for reflexivity and self-awareness throughout the filmmaking process. Ethical documentary practices, as Nichols argues, require securing informed consent, actively involving subjects in the creative process, and maintaining transparency about the film's objectives and potential consequences. By integrating these principles, filmmakers can foster more socially responsible documentaries that respect the dignity and agency of their subjects (Nichols, 2014).

n *Honest Truths. Documentary filmmakers on ethical challenges in their work*, Patricia Aufderheide, Peter Jaszi, and Mridu Chandra examine the ethical dilemmas faced by documentary filmmakers through interviews with forty-five industry professionals. Their study investigates the challenges of balancing ethical responsibilities toward subjects, audiences, and artistic vision. Echoing Nichols' arguments, the report underscores the inherent power asymmetry between filmmakers and their subjects, advocating for guiding principles such as "do no harm" and "protect the vulnerable" as ethical imperatives in documentary practice (Aufderheide, Jaszi, and Chandra, 2009). Similarly, Agnieszka Piotrowska argued that documentary films' contributors risk being transformed into "an object of the gaze of the filmmaker"; according to Piotrowska, since the quest for truth in documentary encounters has been used to excuse ethical violence (for instance pushing witnesses to speak), scholarship and filmmakers should strive for more collaborative approaches to create "true fictions that contributors can live with" (Piotrowska, 2012, p. 260-261). These considerations question if, when portraying people at the edge of experience, documentary authors must decide if their greater obligation is to the witnesses they are representing or to audiences' access to transparent and relevant representations of the real, or if there is a way to ethically serve both.

To address this perceived imbalance in power, advocates of participatory filmmaking, for instance in anthropological and ethnographic documentary filmmaking, have rooted for an approach to documentary in which the subjects of the film actively collaborate in its creation, rather than being merely observed or interviewed. Differing from Nichols' participatory modality, in which the filmmaker often becomes an active participant in the film (see more in the next section of this chapter), appearing on-screen or engaging in dialogue with subjects (consider for instance films like Errol Morris *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), or Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), in participatory filmmaking the author is more of a facilitator promoting dialogue, shared agency, and co-authorship between filmmakers and participants, often aiming at empowering marginalised communities and fostering ethical storytelling

(consider for instance, Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicles of a Summer* (original title: «*Chronique d'un été*», 1961). In the seminal essay *The Camera and Man* (Rouch, 1973 in Feld, 2003, pp. 29-46), Jean Rouch reflects on the role of the filmmaker in ethnographic and documentary cinema. Rouch, a pioneer of *cinéma vérité* and ethnographic film, discusses the ways in which the camera is not merely an instrument of observation but an active participant in the creation of reality. He challenges traditional anthropological methodologies that treat film as a neutral recording device and instead argues for a more engaged and reflexive approach. Differentiating between French *cinéma vérité* from American *direct cinema*, Rouch's arguments highlight that, while both share an interest in capturing reality, *direct cinema* aims for an observational, unobtrusive style, whereas *cinéma vérité* acknowledges the camera's impact on reality and embraces its role as a catalyst for truth. Participatory filmmaking, as Paul Henley has pointed out, can also take on an observational style of filming, an approach that, while aligning with observational aesthetics, goes "beyond observation as a *way of seeing*", and towards observation as a "particular way of doing ethnographic filmmaking"; as Henley explains: "central to this praxis was a collaborative relationship with the subjects, the adoption of an "unprivileged" perspective in both shooting and editing, and a low-key aesthetic based on the preservation during editing of the original sounds and rhythms of the way of life involved" (Henley, 2020, p. 393). One of the high ambitions of Rouch's ethnographic filmmaking, however, is the highest form of participation, a working method in which the camera is a shared research tool rather than a device that mediates authorial subjectivity. In Rouch's words: "And tomorrow? . . . Tomorrow will be the time of completely portable color video, video editing, and instant replay ("instant feedback"). Which is to say, the time of the joint dream of Vertov and Flaherty, of a mechanical ciné-eye-ear and of a camera that can so totally participate that it will automatically pass into the hands of those who, until now, have always been in front of the lens. At that point, anthropologists will no longer control the monopoly on observation; their culture and they themselves will be observed and recorded." (Rouch, 1973, in Feld, 2003, p. 46).

In *On photography*, Susan Sontag reflected on the overabundance of visual material and how it has transformed our viewing ethics (Sontag, 2004), a reflection that reverberates in the landmark observational documentary film *Austerlitz* by Sergei Loznitsa (2016), which documents the phenomenon of tourists visiting former Nazi concentration camps; using a fixed-camera approach, *Austerlitz* captures the behaviors of visitors as they navigate the memorial sites, presenting a stark contrast between the solemn history of these locations and the often casual, distracted, or even indifferent manner in which tourists move through

them—taking selfies, chatting, and wearing summer attire as if on a regular sightseeing trip. Refraining from providing commentary, narration, or interviews, Loznitsa allows the audience to confront the unsettling juxtaposition between remembrance and mass tourism. As Guerra writes: “*Austerlitz* measures a space that gradually allows a history to surface and lets it settle in an atmosphere of disorientation—one that affects both its unwitting actors and its audience. Once the film ends, once the strange performance of hundreds of anonymous bodies in a “place despite everything” is over, one realizes that Loznitsa has not made a film about the Shoah, but has instead given us one of the most incisive visual essays on the *destruction of experience and the technical production of forgetfulness*.” (Guerra, 2020, p. 116, author’s translation).<sup>10</sup>

In *Regarding the pain of others*, Sontag argued that being granted access to seeing the suffering of others through images without having the power to change their circumstances is, irrespective of the observer’s intentions, inherently an act of voyeurism (Sontag, 2003). To frame the potential indifference or morbidity of the spectator’s eye towards the pain of others in representations, a crucial line has been drawn by scholars between witnessing an event- the act of seeing or experiencing an event firsthand in a way that does not necessarily imply responsibility or an ethical imperative to act- and bearing witness- which implies not only having witnessed an event but also taking on the responsibility to acknowledge, interpret, and convey its significance to others (Oliver, 2001; Tait, 2011). Bearing witness often involves an element of testimony, where the person who has witnessed something feels compelled to share or document their experience, particularly in contexts involving trauma, injustice, or historical events; it “extends beyond seeing through practices of enacting responsibility” (Tait, 2011, p. 1220). On the contrary, a person witnessing events may simply be a bystander or observer. In documentary image-making, this distinction is evident in the contrast between a swiftly captured photojournalistic report of a tragic event and a carefully crafted photographic book that emerges from the author's deeply personal, affectionate, and often long-term engagement with the affected community. A compelling example is Eugene W. Smith’s work in *Minamata*, explored in the chapter *Exotopic Forms. Honouring the real*. The crucial difference between these two approaches lies not merely in the duration or depth of

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<sup>10</sup> Guerra wrote: “*Austerlitz* misura uno spazio che lascia gradualmente affiorare una storia e la fa decantare in un clima di disorientamento che riguarda tanto i suoi involontari attori che i suoi destinatari. Finito il film, finita la strana performance di centinaia di corpi anonimi in un “luogo malgrado tutto”, ci si rende conto che Loznitsa non ha fatto un film sulla Shoah, ma ci ha regalato uno dei saggi visivi più acuti sulla *distruzione dell’esperienza e sulla produzione tecnica della dimenticanza*.” (Guerra, 2020, p. 116).

the documentarian's engagement with reality but in the physical and metaphysical stance from which they approach their subject. This positioning—whether detached or intimately involved—might shape the way events are represented, leaving traces of its influence in the documentary forms.

In Nichols' framework for analysing documentary films, he identifies six documentary modes as distinct approaches to representing reality. These modes do not correspond strictly to specific visual styles but rather to methodological principles or modalities of representation—emphasizing the *how* that shapes the filmmaking process and structures the relationship between filmmakers, subjects, and audiences. However, each mode implies certain stylistic choices. The poetic mode, for instance, tends to use abstract imagery, montage editing, and non-linear structures; the expository mode relies on talking heads, archival footage, and authoritative narration; the observational mode is often characterised by long takes, handheld cameras, and natural lighting; the participatory mode includes on-camera presence of the filmmaker and interactive interviews; the reflexive mode may incorporate breaking the fourth wall, direct address, or revealing the filmmaking process; and finally, the performative mode often employs expressive cinematography, personal voiceovers, and experimental techniques (Nichols, 2014). In exploring documentary as a dialogical process we take a distinct stance, one that does not look primarily at documentary through visual styles and modalities of representation, as per Nichols' framework, focusing first on authorial positioning instead- the *why* behind image-making, which informs how authors choose to situate themselves in the physical and immaterial horizon of possible representations of the real.

In the following pages, we examine how framing documentary as a relational and, more specifically, dialogical medium—while prioritizing documentary form over traditions, themes, or content—might reconfigure the interplay between ethics and aesthetics. By situating their entanglements and tensions in dialogue with additional elements, this approach offers a renewed perspective on the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of documentary practice. In this proposed framework, witnessing and bearing witness in documentary representations might be seen as complex dialogical processes that both translate testimony and events into images as they happen, and re-elaborate them successively, through fluid and open-ended exchanges with viewers and authors that reverberate across time and contexts. A premise of this reflection is that the meaning that viewers attribute to images evolves with contexts since

images are inscribed in cultural and historical *scopic regimes*,<sup>11</sup> where representations are mediated by available apparatuses, gazes, *ways of seeing*, and other images, both material, as pictures, and immaterial, as the subjective images that individual consciousness produces in response to experience. By reframing witnesses and authors not as separate or antagonistic entities but as coexisting within representations that, although in different ways, inherently reflect both perspectives, and by shifting its focus from participatory filmmaking—where witnesses are explicitly involved in the filmmaking process—to dialogic approaches that co-construct meaning within representation, this work explores how the author’s physical and metaphysical positioning with respect to the real they document and evoke informs the ethic and aesthetic horizon of possibilities for the dialogic expression of their images.

As several scholars and filmmakers have highlighted, documentary image-making is an inherently relational process for several reasons. First, documentary authors are not unrelated subjects from the real they represent, but co-creators of images in dialogue with a world they exist in. Second, as they simultaneously give aesthetic form to events that unfold unpredictably, and reveal their author’s subjective gaze, documentary images engage dynamically with an objective reality and its subjective experience, bringing to light multiple layers of meaning in an image or visual text. And third, documentary is in itself a speaking perspective, a way to bring forth meanings and allow them to shape the real they represent and inhabit. The following paragraphs consider these three thoughts in more detail.

From Jean Rouch onwards, cinema as a method for inquiring ethnographic encounters presented as an alternative to the supposedly objective, positivistic, “fly-on-the-wall” approach of nonintervention, which found its sublimation in the tradition of direct cinema. According to Feld, “in these films [direct cinema documentaries], Rouch saw a denial of what all ethnographers are forced to learn: that realities are co-constructed and that meanings always change as contexts of interpretation change, continually revealed and modified in numerous ways. Provoking, catalyzing, questioning, and filming are simply strategies for unleashing that revealing process. Rouch insisted that the presence of the camera, like the presence of the ethnographer, stimulates, modifies, accelerates, catalyzes, opens a window (phrases he [Jean Rouch] has used over the years); people respond by revealing themselves, and meanings emerge in that revelation.” (Feld, 2003, p. 16). Unlike fiction, where actors

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<sup>11</sup> A key notion within Visual Culture studies, the *scopic regime* is the result of an excavation operation carried out by Martin Jay through Christian Metz’s studies on cinema; it appears in this formulation for the first time in Jay’s *Scopic regimes of modernity* (1988) (Cometa, 2016 a). In Jay’s contribution, the chosen term ‘regime’ refers to the political implications of the visual domain and the act of seeing and representing reality (Jay, 1988).

follow a script, witnesses in documentary typically live their unscripted lives, contributing organically to the image-making process. As Vittorio de Seta explained, the documentary film director's primary preoccupation is to put the film's witnesses at ease, so that they reveal themselves spontaneously, rather than instructing them (De Seta in Balsamo and Pannone, 2010, pp. 11-13). On these premises, rather than giving aesthetic form to a preexisting, immutable reality, documentary filmmaking emerges as an aesthetic process in which both witnesses and reality in general co-construct meaning through representations along with documentary authors (Balsamo and Pannone, 2010; Pannone, 2021). Making documentary films becomes a way to inscribe ethical spaces of encounter between filmmakers and witnesses, in the awareness that the presence of the camera inevitably mediates these interactions; bearing the traces of such mediated encounters, images represent relational processes and modalities of engagement with the world as well as with audiences (Colusso, 2017). As explored in the more recent work of Therese Hanningsten and Juliette Joffé titled *Strangers within. Documentary as encounter*- an anthology with texts from documentary scholars and filmmakers including Andrea Luka Zimmermann, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and David macDougall, - the documentary cinematic space, precisely because there is a filmic apparatus that mediates exchanges, functions as a place where unique encounters and interactions take place; through these, filmmakers and witnesses dialogue in altered, unprecedented and possibly more evocative, intimate, thought-provoking, and transformative ways for both themselves and audiences (Hanningsten and Joffrè, 2022). Delving into the phenomenology of viewing and analysing how documentaries create ethical spaces of encounter between viewers and subjects on delicate subject matters such as that of the end of life, Sobchack argues that watching a documentary is an embodied experience, engaging viewers ethically through the presence of the subject; this perspective underscores documentaries as shared spaces of affective and ethical exchange; according to Sobchack, filming death specifically, due to the indexical nature of documentary, that is its irreducible connection to the real, produces both an ethical dilemma- if and to what extent representing the process of dying is permissible, as well as visibility paradoxes, in the ways documentary often avoid directly showing the end of life due to its taboo status, while at the same time violent death is overrepresented in mass media (Sobchack, 2004, p. 242-243). To address these concerns, Sobchack introduces the ethical gaze as ethical encounter, a *way of seeing* and representing the real that is framed within an attentive, self-reflexive, and responsible approach that resists both voyeuristic fascination and detached indifference, avoiding the empty aestheticisation of

suffering while creating instead ethical spaces of witnessing, where the subjects retain agency over their representation. Implying that the act of looking at suffering requires a position of ethical awareness, rather than mere visual consumption, Sobhack's ethical gaze balances the tension between presence and distance, advocating for an ethically responsible gaze that is neither too detached, resembling cold observation, nor too intrusive, or flowing towards sensationalism (Sobchack, 2004, p. 243).

These considerations introduce the aspect of multidimensionality in documentary images. Taking part in evolving entanglements between their various and occasionally contraposing aspects, documentary images exist to represent both an objective testimony, and a subjective presentation of the real, as well as a dialogue between the two. As the work of Dottorini (2019) and Bertozzi (2018) suggest, documentary cinema straddles the line between objective documentation and subjective authorship, embodying both a material trace of reality and an interpretive artistic expression. This dual nature exposes fundamental ontological questions about the nature of reality itself. Badiou (2020) explores this problem in *In search of the lost real*, where he examines the tension between semblance and reality starting from the well-known anecdote of Molière's death. As the playwright performed *The imaginary invalid*, feigning illness on stage, he was simultaneously succumbing to a real, fatal illness. The coincidence of real and representation collapses the boundary between them, revealing that reality is not something we simply access, but something we divide in the very act of trying to grasp it (we will further explore this idea through the concept of interval in the section titled *Synchronicity. Attuning to the real*). From the anecdote of Molière's death, to Pirandello's naked masks in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* and *Enrico VII*, Badiou travels through these grey areas of interaction between fiction and reality, masks and authenticity, to conclude that the real is never purely present; it is always masked, and accessing it requires tearing off its disguise—a violent act that does not expose an absolute truth, but instead produces a further division. Reality, in this view, is not a unified whole waiting to be revealed, but a fragmented, shifting terrain where what is real and what appears to be real are equally operative; likewise, objectivity exists through the subjective experience of it, in dialogue with the objective real. Documentary images operate within this paradox. Their power lies not in offering an unmediated reflection of reality, but in actively engaging with it through their layered nature. They are shaped by the interplay of framing, selection, and interpretation—acts that do not merely capture reality but inevitably transform it. In this sense, documentary images can be seen as ever-shifting, multifaceted structures, akin to a

polyhedron where each face reveals a different but equally partial aspect of the real. If truth exists, it is not within any single face of the polyhedron, but in its dynamic movements as a whole and over time. Going deeper, documentary images, like every image, show not only an already problematic transitory dimension (what they depict, their direct relationship with reality, objectivity and truth) but also a reflexive one (how they present themselves, and thus express the filmmaker's perspective). These two aspects, though sometimes in tension, coexist within the frame. In "Mimesi e Descrizione", an essay within the seminal collection *Della Rappresentazione* (2014), Louis Marin identifies these two fundamental dimensions as constitutive of the act of representing. For Marin, to represent means to identify a portion of reality on one hand, and to present the subjective process of identification behind it, on the other; there is a divisive tension that splits the act of representing into two distinct operations: to represent what is, and to present an aesthetic object; in his words: "representing means presenting oneself in the act of representing something, and every representation, every sign or representational process, comprises a dual dimension: a reflexive dimension—presenting itself; and a transitive dimension—representing something" (Marin, 2014, p. 113, author's translation)<sup>12</sup>. In this framework, documentary representations integrate the real they represent, and the representation itself, which hides two further aspects- the ways in which a situated subjectivity both experienced what is, and put it into a documentary form- into a third object, the simultaneous representation of both. The extension in meaning that these three aspects can generate are particularly evident in films of the real that blur the boundaries between documentary and fiction; as anticipated in the introduction, starting from the origins of cinema, the list is endless; restricting the attention to Italian documentary films produced between 2009 and 2018, the *Luce institute* listed fifty films under the titled: "Italian cinema between documentary and fiction, a new neorealist wave"; amongst them *87 ore* (2015) and *Sembra mio Figlio* (2018) by Costanza Quatriglio, *Le Quattro Volte* (2010) by Michelangelo Frammartino, *Dal profondo* (2013) by Valentina Pedicini, *Belluscone. Una Storia Siciliana* (2014) by Franco Maresco, *Fuocoammare* (2016), *Sacro Gra* (2013) by Gianfranco Rosi, *I Ricordi del Fiume* (2015) by Giuanluca and Massimiliano De Serio, *L'intrusa* (2017) by leonardo di Costanzo, *La Nave Dolce* (2012) by Daniele Vicari, *Liberami* (2016) by

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<sup>12</sup>Translated from: "rappresentare significa presentarsi nell'atto di rappresentare qualcosa e ogni rappresentazione, ogni segno o processo rappresentazionale comprende una doppia dimensione- una dimensione riflessiva: presentarsi; e una dimensione transitiva: rappresentare qualcosa".(Marin, 2014, p. 113).

Francesca Di Giacomo, *Materia Oscura* (2013) by Martina Parenti e Massimo D'anolfi, *Stop the Pounding Heart* (2013) and *Lousiana* (2015) by Roberto Minervini, *Samouni Road* (2018) by Stefano Savona and *Bella e Perduta* (2015) by Pietro Marcello (Maire in Cattani e Moscato, 2018).

Finally, documentary filmmaking is a dynamic aesthetic and ethical process of discovery and exchange with reality, one that tries to “capture a world of becoming” (Hongisto, 2015, p. 11) while being an active part of the same world (this is why for instance it often happens that filmmakers grasp the full meaning of the images they create sometimes after the production stage of a documentary film, during editing, post-production, or even in the projection room). In Hongisto's paradigm, capturing a dynamic real happens primarily through the act of framing; in her aesthetics of the frame, framing is not just a technical choice of authors, but a performative gesture that actively constructs and transforms reality, in contrast with Grierson's “aesthetic of the document”, which assumes a divide between raw reality and its artistic treatment (Hongisto, 2015, p. 14). In her words: “Framing institutes a threshold to a world of becoming rich in the transformative potential of individual bodies and actual forms. This reorients the ethical stakes of documentary cinema from producing accurate and authentic representations to creatively contributing to the transformability of actual beings in the real. This is an ethics that does not entail promises of a better future, but that works to sustain the pull of difference in the face of often atrocious actualities. In this book, framing is the performative practice with which documentary cinema participates in and contributes to the real as process” (Hongisto, 2015, p. 16). In our reflections we consider the act of framing along with other crucial authorial choices that shape representations, namely the editing process.

As introduced above, documentary appears to be not only a relational medium, but also a dynamic representation of relatedness, one that does not apply exclusively to the realm of encounters, as recent works suggest. Of particular interest are the contributions that turn to the elements as the ground zero of the so-called filmic and relational space in documentary. In “Documenting the air” (2024), Laura Harris explores how atmospheric theories are making their way into documentary film studies, and proposes to use the air to inquiry the relatedness and situatedness of “documentary-like forms”, a term she borrows from Bettina Frankham to describe the malleability of documentary forms that “are responsive less to genre and more to the specific ‘materials, ideas, audiences, [and] exhibition circumstance’ with which they are in conversation” (Frankham, 2022, in Harris, 2024, p. 2). In Harris' paradigm, the atmosphere

connects all the human and non-human elements that documentary puts into relation; and through the atmosphere the duality of subject and object of perception is transcended, as the air connects the two indissolubly. Both the filmmaker and the witness can access the immaterial texture that connects them through an “atmospheric attunement” (Harris, 2024, p. 11). Amongst the films that Harris analyses through the concept of air as a medium that enables the relations that documentary allows to take place, while also making them visible, is the work of Margaret Tait (1918-1999), a Scottish filmmaker who trained at Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia to later direct a number of highly experimental films. Harris chooses Tait because her approach to documentary practice has been described by artist and curator Tamara Krikoria (1983) as “breathing with the camera”. This expression describes the level of entanglement at stake for Tait, but it can be used to describe the capacity of documentary images to represent relatedness while being part of the world. The filmmaker metaphorically breathes in the reality they work with and exist in, and then breathes out a new, transfigured world, which may be described as their reality, where the plural adjective possessive includes the filmmaker, the witness and the spectator, in a dynamic, transformative, unified, synchronic and simultaneous web of exchanges; as well as its representation. As Merleau-Ponty wrote about the relationship between representor, represented, and representation: “Between the observer and the visible, roles inevitably reverse. This is why so many painters have said that things look back at them. As André Marchand, following Klee, expressed: «Many times in a forest, I felt that it was not I who was looking at the forest. On certain days, I felt that it was the trees that were looking at me, that they were speaking to me... I was there, listening... I believe that a painter must allow themselves to be penetrated by the universe, rather than attempting to penetrate it. I wait to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint in order to be born». What we call inspiration should be taken literally: there is a true inhalation and exhalation of Being, a breathing within Being, an action and passion so indistinguishable that one no longer knows who sees and who is seen, who paints and who is painted.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1989, p.26, author’s translation).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Translated from: “Tra il rappresentatore e il visibile, i ruoli inevitabilmente si invertono. Ecco perché tanti pittori hanno detto che le cose li guardavano, e André Marchand, dopo Klee: “Più volte in una foresta, ho sentito che non ero io a guardare la foresta. Ho sentito, certi giorni, che erano gli alberi che mi guardavano, che mi parlavano...Io ero là, in ascolto...Credo che il pittore debba lasciarsi penetrare dall’universo, e non volerlo penetrare...Attendo di essere interiormente sommerso, sepolto. Forse, dipingo per nascere. Quel che si definisce ispirazione, dovrebbe venir preso alla lettera: c’è realmente ispirazione ed espirazione dell’Essere, respirazione nell’Essere, azione e passione così poco distinguibili che non si sa più chi vede e chi viene visto, chi dipinge e chi viene dipinto.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1989, p.26).

In the essay *An oceanic feeling. Cinema and the sea*, Erika Balsom discusses the oceanic feeling that film can evoke- a sense of being part of something larger- by contributing to a shared ethical and relational experience, making documentary an art form that does not just depict reality but actively creates spaces for communal engagement and ethical reflections (Balsom, 2018 a). The essay is the result of Balsom's work as curator in residence at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, through which she selected the work of eleven international artists that confronted the theme of the ocean in their films. As Balsom writes in the introduction to the catalogue of the event: "What is oceanic feeling? For Sigmund Freud, it is the sensation of an unbreakable bond between oneself and the outside world. Rather than an assertion of mastery over the world as a standing reserve to be instrumentalised by human will, oceanic feeling is a quasi-sublime state in which the integrity of the self is lost, or at least compromised, in a sense of limitlessness, unboundedness, and interconnectedness. Freud describes it as something akin to an acknowledgement he finds in a line from Christian Grabbe's play Hannibal- «Out of this world, I cannot fall»" (Balsom, 2018 c, p. 6). Even though the films' theme is indeed the ocean, Balsom warns the reader that oceanic feeling refers not to the subject of the films, but to the epistemology of the filmmakers involved. Balsom's reflections hint at cinema's tie to a fluid relatedness in three ways. Firstly, cinema, more than other mediums, possesses an inseparable, dynamic link to the real. Secondly, when films show diverse perspectives, they allow the spectator to perceive life and reality from a different point of view, which easily triggers a feeling of unity similar to Freud's notion of oceanic feeling; thirdly, film comes from fluid, dialogic connections between the camera, the filmmaker, the witnesses and the spectator.

As previously noted, documentary forms are not merely the product of a network of relations; they are also dynamically immersed in the environments they depict, as well as being part of multiple cohorts of images; in other words, they exist both in dialogue with a world they are part of, and with other images. Unlike relatedness, which suggests a fixed web of connections with images at the centre, dialogism implies an ecosystem of dynamic, evolving exchanges without a clear centre; one that accommodates changes in meaning, contradictions, tensions, and reinterpretations over time. A dialogic approach, rooted in Bakhtin's theories, emphasises open-ended, multi-voiced interactions where different perspectives coexist and engage with one another without reaching a monologic resolution (Bakhtin, 2000). A documentary form possesses dialogic qualities because rather than imposing a singular, fixed and authoritative

meaning, it fosters the coexistence of multiple and fluid dimensions of meaning, as we will further explore in the next section.

Bakhtin's ideas develop in the context of the written and spoken word. According to Bakhtin, language is never fixed—discourse is always in flux, influenced by past and unforeseen dialogue and interaction; no utterance is purely objective or neutral since every form of expression carries traces of past discourses, social tensions, and intellectual positionings; likewise, discourses influences voices yet to come by creating the context in which they shall express. As opposed to a dialectical approach, the Bakhtinian dialogic principle suggests that dialogue is never conclusive or static but remains an open-ended, evolving process that does not aim at synthesising opposing worldviews into a unified and resolute understanding. In Bakhtin's words: "At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the past and the present, between different epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. These "languages" of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying languages." (Bakhtin, 2008 a, p. 291).

At its core, the dialogic principle highlights the role of dialogue as a form of co-creation of meaning through immediate and dynamic exchanges between multiple voices and their evolving perspectives in shifting contexts; ; as Bakhtin writes: "meaning is personal: there is always within it a question, an appeal to, and an anticipation of, the answer; there are always two subjects in it (the dialogical minimum)" (Bakhtin in Todorov, 1995, p. 21). For Bakhtin, meanings always exist in response to and in relation to other meanings; every utterance responds not only to previous discourse (what has already been said), but also anticipates future responses (how it will be interpreted); as he states: "The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 280). In other words, human communication cannot exist and express itself in isolation, but always and only within an ecosystem of voices and meanings that both preexist, and outlive any one dialogue; thus every word-meaning, haunted by past ghosts of dialogues, and anticipatory of future discourses, is not a fixed concept but a

spectrum that evolves along with the fluid becoming of the real and the ever-changing landscape of the human experience.

Just as water and air embody a fluid, non-hierarchical interconnection of elements, a dialogic approach resists singular authority. Rather than subordinating perspectives to a dominant voice, it allows multiple voices to influence one another while retaining their own integrity, creating a polyphony of viewpoints. In his view, the novel, unlike poetry or epic literature, is particularly adept at absorbing these competing voices, allowing them to interact and shape meaning; because of this, the novel has the potential to be not the author's monologue but a dialogue of competing perspectives; in his analysis of Dostoevsky's work, Bakhtin introduces the concept of polyphony, where multiple independent voices coexist, each with its own perspective and integrity; as he states, "What unfolds in his [Dostoevsky's] works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6).

Although Bakhtin focuses on dialogism as an intertextual dimension of discourse, his reflection "turns into a form of anthropology" since in Bakhtin's view "it is the human being itself that is irreducibly heterogeneous; it is human "being" that exists only in dialogue: within being one finds the other. This anthropology is articulated around the same set of values that already governed, for Bakhtin, the history of literature, trans-linguistics, and the methodology of the human sciences: foremost, there is always becoming, incompleteness, dialogue" (Bakhtin in Todorov, 1995, p. x-xi). After all, for Bakhtin "Man, in his human specificity, is always expressing himself (speaking), that is always creating a text (though it may remain *in potentia*)" (Bakhtin in Todorov, 1995, p. 17); hence, what Bakhtin sees as discourse and text extends beyond textual expression or literature, to include human agency; in his words: "The human act is a text *in potentia*. Science of spirit. The spirit, mine as well as the other's, is not a given, like a thing (like the immediate object of the natural sciences); rather, it comes through expression in signs, a realization through "texts", which is of equal value to the self and to the other" (Bakhtin in Todorov, 1995, p. 18).

As these reflections suggest, documentary representations, as both visual texts and figurations of a real in becoming, are engaged with the real rather than simply recording it. Like texts, documentary forms can be viewed differently over time—their significance shifting depending on who is engaging with them, when, and in what context; their meanings and interpretations are continuously subject to revision as new voices and perspectives emerge.

Like discourses, images of the present are haunted by images of the past and their meanings, as much as they anticipate future images and meanings; they exist in a continuum of dialogues and never in isolation, not only when they are presented as part of visual streams or series of images, but also because they always relate to the immaterial and mental images of authors, witnesses and spectators alike. Hence, the dialogic framing of documentary forms emphasizes three key factors: openness to polyphony, or the integration of multiple perspectives, as well as contextual elements, authorial choices, and so on, that influence one another in intricate and nonlinear ways, in a process that leads to the co-construction of dimensions of meaning, allowing for ongoing reinterpretation and complexity; immediacy, and the ever-evolving construction of new meaning through active listening and response in an ever-changing present moment; and dynamism, that is how images are part of the world they represent, and thus in a continuous dialogue with past and present images, both material and immaterial.

One of the starting points for our explorations in the next session is that documentary representations are co-constructed aesthetic objects that involve the internal self as well as the external world. The premise for this reflection is recognising the complexity at play in the relationships between documentary representations, vision and subjective experiences; an interplay that involves the objective real and the subjectivity of perceptions, as well as both in dialogue. As Bakhtin argues, the aesthetic object cannot be understood through either an objective empiricist approach that looks solely at its materiality, or a subjective empiricism that considers predominantly the psychological and physical reactions of those who create or experience it; “the “artistic,” in its totality, does not reside in the thing, or in the psyche of the creator, considered independently, not even in that of the contemplator: the artistic includes all three together. It is a *specific form of the relation between creator and contemplators, fixed in the artistic work*”. (Bakhtin in Todorov, 1995, p. 21). Consider how we think of vision as a purely objective process, although it appears to be far more complex. Aldous Huxley, in *The art of seeing* (1942), investigates vision as a dynamic process shaped by the mind, senses, and nervous system; he breaks it down into three stages: sensation (extracting raw and objective visual data from reality), selection (prioritising details through the retina’s sharpest regions), and perception (translating sensory input into meaning), (Huxley, 1942). Crucially, perception is not a neutral process—it is conditioned by memory, experience, and subjective interest. Likewise, documentary representations are shaped not only by the physical observation of the

objective real, but also by the metaphysical positioning of the image-maker—their subjective associations, memories, and emotions. As we will explore below, the author's vision/perception of the real is influenced by their internal images, for example memories of past experiences, which shape what and how they see. These interactions are essential to uncovering/creating meanings. Consider a painter and a passerby observing the same meadow. The painter, attuned to color, perceives an array of greens—basil, harlequin, moss, olivine, emerald—while the passerby sees only an undifferentiated green mass. Both are drawing from the same visual raw material (*sensa*), yet their perceptions diverge due to their unique *ways of seeing*. Just as documentary images reflect the filmmaker's perspective, reality itself is filtered through the observer's mind. Because the processes of sensation, selection, and perception occur almost simultaneously, individuals are often unaware of their active role in shaping what they see. Unless trained to recognise and challenge cognitive biases, they mistake their filtered perceptions for objective reality. However, both perception and representation are not governed solely by the blind influence of past knowledge, experience and emotion—free will acts as a further fluid, unpredictable force that shapes how we see. The passerby may one day choose to pause to admire the emerald green of bay leaves. This interplay between structured patterns of perception and spontaneous shifts in attention suggest that seeing, like representing, is not an entirely fixed act but the result of a co-constructive dialogue between the self and the real.

In other words, documentary forms appear to be not mere representations about the world, but the result of dialogic experiences that hold transformative potential; these interactions engage numerous elements including the gaze of the author, their subjective perception, material and immaterial images like memory, the apparatuses involved, and the physical reality they both interact with and are part of. In the pages that follow we explore the dialogic principle in documentary forms by looking at multidimensionality, synchronicity and exotopy- three possible documentary processes through which the qualities of the dialogic principle may become visible in documentary forms. This is not meant to serve as a fixed or comprehensive scheme of either documentary modalities or forms; far from this, it presents as an open discourse, a loose reference to explore the dialogical aspects of documentary forms through three declinations. Expanding on Hongisto's views, we look at the role of the physical and metaphysical positioning of authors, and its influence over the act of framing, as well as other formal and technical choices of authors, primarily those involved in the editing process. Before delving into multidimensionality, synchronicity and exotopy, the section that

follows explores how images as dialogical visual texts stem from the positioning of authors, which determines the boundaries of their images' explorative possibilities- the ethic and aesthetic confines of their dialogic expression.

## **2. Physical and metaphysical positioning of the author.**

### **Transfiguring the real**

The image-maker's positioning in relation to reality is both a physical and metaphysical choice, encompassing a series of intentional and unintentional decisions about space, time, and perspective. This includes not only where and when representation occurs but also the filmmaker's intellectual and emotional stance toward their subject. In this framework, all other technical and artistic choices - how to frame the real, how to edit and post-produce the footage - cascade from this foundational positioning. Each unique combination of these decisions results in a distinct image and narrative, shaping different interpretations of the same events. Henri James describes the vastity of these possibilities through the metaphor of a building with a million windows that opens onto the world: "The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million- a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, ensuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pair of eyes, the window may not open; "fortunately" by reason, precisely, of this incalculability of range. The spreading field, the human scene, is the "choice of subject"; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the "literary form"; but they are, singly or together, as nothing

without the posted presence of the watcher--without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has been conscious. Thereby I shall express to you at once his boundless freedom and his “moral” reference.” (James, 1908, p. 51).

According to Casetti, who referred to James’ vision to investigate the narrow perspective of the narrator on the world, James crucially speaks not of small differences but of diametrical opposites. In Casetti’s reflections the authorial perspective is everything as it determines the heart of images and the stories they depict, the chosen human scenes; the partiality of the author’s point of view- their embodied and situated vision, but also their consciousness- is thus not a limit for image-making, but a vantage point (Casetti, 2020, p. 55-62). In Casetti’s words: “Every narrative implies a gaze; this gaze is tied to a point of view, meaning a specific position from which one sees. The point of view coincides with the presence of an observer and simultaneously reveals the conditions of observation. It is the *locus* where the gaze takes shape within a scopic subject, situating itself within a network of circumstances. Thus, it is what assigns the gaze its *ego-hic-nunc* - its “I-here-now”- which ultimately makes it a truly worldly gaze.” (Casetti, 2020, p. 59, author’s translation).<sup>14</sup> Shaped through the author’s point of view, images stem from a unique consciousness and situatedness. In *Situated knowledges. The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective* (1988), Donna Haraway proposes an embedded, situated and political epistemology of the gaze: “I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity.” (Haraway, 1988, p. 587). To elaborate her methodological proposal, Haraway poses fundamental questions to expose the relativity of the gaze: “How to see? Where to see from? What limits to vision? What to see for? Whom to see with? Who gets to have more than one point of view? Who gets blinded? Who wears blinders? Who interprets the visual field? What other sensory powers do we wish to cultivate besides vision? Moral

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<sup>14</sup> Casetti wrote: “ogni racconto implica uno sguardo; questo sguardo è legato a un punto di vista, e cioè a un preciso punto da cui si vede; il punto di vista coincide con la presenza di un osservatore e nello stesso tempo evidenzia le condizioni dell'osservazione; esso è cioè il “*locus*” in cui lo sguardo si incarna in un soggetto scopico e si situa in un complesso di circostanze; e dunque è ciò che assegna allo sguardo quell'*ego-hic-nunc* che ne fa uno sguardo finalmente mondano.” (Casetti, 2020, p. 59).

and political discourse should be the paradigm for rational discourse about the imagery and technologies of vision.” (Haraway, 1988, p. 587).

During a seminal masterclass on the centrality of the point of view in documentary filmmaking held in June 2015 at the Italian National Film School of Documentary, author Evelina Santangelo and film director Costanza Quatriglio discussed the ways in which physical and metaphysical positionings shape documentary images and storytelling through the analysis of the short story *La grande breteche* by Honoré de Balzac.<sup>15</sup> In the story, Balzac visits a village near Vendôme in France when his curiosity is drawn to an old, dark, and isolated house faced by a neglected garden. Balzac’s first perspective is from a hill overlooking the house. From this detached vantage point, he notes its decay and silence, associating it with a tomb (a merchant’s grave he had seen earlier)—both are sites where past and present coexist, both are linked to darkness and death, both evoke the presence of something hidden destined to decay over time. His imagination takes over, sensing an invisible inscription of “mystery” over the house. The tomb metaphor becomes the foundation for his curiosity, linking an external object (the estate) with an internal memory (the merchant’s grave). Balzac’s second perspective is from a close side street; from there he examines an old entrance to the property - an arched door that has been bricked up. Through some holes in the door, Balzac glimpses remnants of its past grandeur and, since both the estate’s name—*La Grande Bretèche*—and its architectural beauty contrast with its neglect, suspects a hidden legal or moral interdiction. From this new and closer viewpoint, the tomb-like stillness transforms into a feeling of revenge in Balzac’s perception, as he wonders about the vengeful hand that sealed the house’s fate. His storytelling impulse grows as he intuitively feels that the estate is tied to a larger story about power, secrecy, and punishment within the French elite. His third perspective is the most immersive and differs from the previous two because time has passed and he has visited the villa various times before. Sneaking through a wild hedge, which causes pain, he physically enters the estate. From this point, he returns to the property over and over again to contemplate the house for hours from the garden. During these acquaintances he gets lost in many possible stories, but none of these is directly connected to his visits of the estate, which lead him to discard them as solid narrative traces. Then, one day he notices that it feels really cold in the garden; one of the following evenings,

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<sup>15</sup> The Italian documentary film school *Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia*, now known as *Scuola Nazionale di Cinema, sezione Documentario in Palermo*.

a howling wind strikes a rusty weathervane, producing a moaning sound, shifting his perception from mere observation to sensory participation. Now, the house “speaks”—it is no longer just an object of curiosity but an embodied presence. This deeper encounter leads him to a final realization: “the house is a sorrow turned into a monument” (de Balzac, 1988, p. 79). Balzac’s shifting perspectives parallel the role of three witnesses in his investigation. The first two viewpoints correspond to two informants who voluntarily approach him—the notary, who provides a legal perspective on the estate’s interdiction, and the innkeeper, who adds hearsay and local gossip; both come to Balzac on their own initiative; with the innkeeper, as his point of view is more defined, Balzac plays a more active role in shaping the investigation by asking direct questions. The third perspective, which grants him direct access to the estate, mirrors Rosalie, a servant and the key witness. Unlike the others, she does not come to Balzac—he must seek her out, persuade her, and “unlock” her testimony. She is the “walled-up door” of the story, the one who holds crucial details but lacks the ability to see the larger meaning of events— even though Rosalie answers all of Balzac’s incisive questions about what happened, the bigger picture remains a mystery to her. She cannot give meaning to the information as much as the storyteller can, the external and internal observer that has listened to all witnesses and who has experienced the call to tell the story of the Grande Breteche through progressively close encounters with the estate. Ultimately, the storyteller is the only one who can fill in two key gaps—reconstructing a coherent narrative by connecting detached fragments of information; and shaping their significance, finding the broader meaning of the story— transforming a seemingly minor chain of events surrounding the property into an exploration of bourgeois power, secrecy, and emotional coldness. His final narrative does not merely relay facts but breathes life into an intuition and an initial, direct and psycho-physical experience of the place— rooted in the feelings of pain and cold he felt at the estate, as well as his initial association of the house with a tomb.

Santangelo’s and Quatriglio’s analysis of Balzac’s short story is enlightening for documentary image-making in many ways. As discussed, Balzac’s creative research begins with seemingly unimportant sensations and the curiosity to penetrate a potentially irrelevant place. The author finds a relevant story regarding the Grande Breteche when he starts to truly listen to his intuitions, which evolve into narrative material through three key elements: Balzac’s determination to follow up on his feelings and hypothesis over time; his willingness to experience discomfort in order to get closer and closer to the place that captured his attention;

and finally, an open and active position of listening, that he directs towards his own inner perceptions, as much as towards external events and witnesses. More importantly, the relationship between Balzac and the Grande Breteche evolves as the author physically moves across different points of observation, which are also different emotional positionings, or states of consciousness, which generate new sensations, intuitions and hypotheses for the story. These evolving positionings of the author-researcher influences both the research and the story- not the objectivity of facts, but the subjective meaning that the author attributes to events; they opens a series of unique windows on the world, which determine how authors frame reality, as well as other creative decisions in documentary image-making.

If physical positioning influences image-making in direct ways, could the same be said for the realm of the non-physical, since these two aspects are integrated and inseparable? Wim Wenders describes this unity by using the German term *einstellung*, which means adjustment, setting, focusing, take, and also tuning in, attitude, and view.<sup>16</sup> Wenders writes: “behind every shot, there is always a person who frames it, taking a position in relation to what is being filmed. The moral act inherent in every shot lies in the respect—both for what the camera captures and for the meaning it conveys and projects onto the screen. This act of fixing and preserving meaning within an image can only be considered moral in terms of respect. A filmmaker strives to honour both the subject of the image and the truth it communicates. Not everyone believes in this intrinsic quality of cinema. Yet, behind every shot, one can sense the attitudes of those operating the camera, who bear responsibility for the film. I firmly believe that every shot reflects the filmmaker’s nature and that each image reveals not only what stands before the camera but also what lies behind it. The camera functions in two directions—it captures its objects, but it also exposes its subjects.” (Wenders, 2022, p. 96,

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<sup>16</sup> Definition taken from the German-English Collins dictionary.

author's translation).<sup>17</sup> Framing from a given disposition or *einstellung* is both a conscious decision and a process of self-discovery. Rossellini wrote that cinema, unlike literature, is always a "first draft", meaning that a film is an open work, subjected to be reinterpreted over time and across contexts. (Rossellini, 2006, p. 36); in Wenders' view, the documentary filmmaker deals with the unexpected of the real precisely by making a film: "For me, making a film means solving the problem that the film itself poses, and this task is not clear before shooting begins. The film thus becomes a path to clarity, a means of learning and understanding—sometimes even of rejecting something. (Wenders, 2022, p. 53, author's translation).<sup>18</sup> The visual research of the documentary maker is open and yet defined by the aesthetic possibilities of the author's *einstellung*; as Tucci explains: "The term, which refers to both a mental and physical state, carries a dual meaning: it signifies both the movement required to attain a certain disposition and the state of stillness once that disposition is reached. This duality is further reflected in the term's moral and aesthetic dimensions." (Tucci, 2019, p. 384, author's translation).<sup>19</sup>

In Wenders' reflection, the physical and metaphysical positioning of the author precedes the act of framing, and informs it. As Klee wrote in relation to the complex dialogue between vision, experience and representation: "beyond the methods of penetrating insights into the object, which we will discuss, there are paths that establish a resonant relationship between the self and the object, transcending optical foundations. First, there is the non-optical path of

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<sup>17</sup> Translated from: "Dietro ogni inquadratura c'è sempre una persona che la realizza e che prende posizione rispetto a ciò che viene inquadrato. Direi che l'atto morale insito in ogni inquadratura consiste nel rispetto sia nei confronti di ciò che la cinepresa riprende che verso il significato veicolato e poi proiettato sullo schermo. Questo atto di fissare e conservare un senso in un'immagine possiamo considerarlo morale solo come rispetto. Un cineasta fa ogni sforzo per portare rispetto verso l'oggetto dell'immagine e il contenuto di verità che comunica. Non tutti credono a questa caratteristica del cinema: dietro ogni inquadratura si possono intuire le attitudini delle persone nascoste dietro la macchina da presa, e che portano la responsabilità del film. Io credo fermamente che ogni inquadratura rispecchi anche l'indole del cineasta, e che ogni immagine ci mostri ciò che sta davanti e al contempo dietro la macchina da presa. La cinepresa funziona in due direzioni, mostra i suoi oggetti ma anche i soggetti. (...) Il concetto di inquadratura [*einstellung*] si è fissato in maniera geniale nella nostra lingua." (Wenders, 2022, p. 96).

<sup>18</sup> Translated from: "Per me realizzare un film significa risolvere il problema che il film pone, e questo compito non viene chiarito prima dell'inizio delle riprese. Il film diventa così la strada per giungere alla chiarezza, per imparare, per capire; talvolta, anche per rifiutare qualcosa." (Wenders, 2022, p. 53).

<sup>19</sup> Tucci wrote: "Il termine, che rimanda a uno stato mentale oltre che fisico, possiede un doppio significato, poiché significa sia il movimento necessario a raggiungere una certa disposizione che lo stato di 'quiete', quello della disposizione raggiunta. Duplicità che si reitera anche nella doppia valenza, morale ed estetica del termine" (Tucci, 2019, p. 384).

earthly roots, rising from below to the eye of the self. Second, there is the equally non-optical path of cosmic communion, descending from above. Together, these paths are metaphysical” (Klee, 2004, p. 27, author’s translation).<sup>20</sup> Earlier in this work, we discussed Hongisto’s “aesthetic of the frame” as opposed to Grierson’s “aesthetic of the document”; according to Hongisto, framing is of primary importance because it is through framing that documentary authors both participate and capture the unfolding of the real (Hongisto, 2015, pp. 11-23). And in fact, of all creative processes that documentary cinema entails, framing might be the least manipulable.<sup>21</sup> While images can be cropped in post production, footage can be cut, their colours and direct sound can be altered, the crucial choices behind framing, such as the distance of the camera from the subject, what to include in the frame, the chosen axis of the lense with respect to the real, and its angle of observation, as well as the technical settings, such as the shutter speed, aperture and ISO sensitivity, cannot be reversed or fully revised and thus become determinant in retaining the traces of the original encounter between the image-maker and reality in the final documentary form of films or photographs. However, framing is in itself a conscious or unconscious creative decision that influences the final form along with editing and post-production choices; and all these choices descend from the author’s physical and metaphysical positioning, which is what glues together all the fragments of the story/document and establish/uncover its larger meaning, as we discussed in relation to Balzac’s short story. The encounter between the real and the chosen positioning (which dynamically evolves and shifts as the author gains more experience and knowledge) is bifold and nuanced, as the image-maker/author is simultaneously the narrator-interpreter of the world, as well as an agent participant in the real they are representing. Likewise, the documentary forms are not fixed objects but dynamic processes as they both stem from the shifting positioning choices of their authors, and inform them. We have called this process not one of transformation but of transfiguration. To transfigure means to alter in outward

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<sup>20</sup> Translated from: “Al di là di questi metodi di penetranti intuizioni dell’oggetto si spingono le vie che indicheremo, vie che pongono l’io e l’oggetto in un rapporto di risonanza che trascende i fondamenti ottici. In primo luogo la via non ottica della radice terrestre che dal basso sale all’occhio dell’io; e in secondo luogo la via del pari non ottica, della comunanza cosmica, che proviene dall’alto. Vie che congiuntamente sono metafisiche”. (Klee, 2004, p. 27).

<sup>21</sup> Even though the reflections relating to the deployment of AI in manipulating documentary images are outside the scope of this thesis, the fact that framing is a non manipulable form of interaction with the real might somewhat change after the introduction of artificial intelligences that can artificially enlarge the frame by creating what is outside the frame based on the elements inside the frame.

form; to transform, so as to glorify or exalt; to metamorphose into a new and elevated appearance.<sup>22</sup> The simple act of choosing portions of the real that are worth capturing, or that of selecting footage that is worth sharing with an audience for the film's final form puts chosen fragments of the real on a pedestal, and makes them visible to others; these actions "elevate" these fragments over the stream of reality, not because they are inherently better or more worthy, but because of the authorial decision to collect and share them, which attaches a specific value and meaning to them, making them unique. By leading the image-maker to focus on some visual elements while discarding others, the author's positioning influences the meaning of the story; moving through time and space and changing their point of view accordingly, the author, guided by their intuitions, captures reality while creating it at the same time.

How does the author's positioning evolve over time? As Balzac's shows, it develops in relation to the author's ability to tune in to their emotional states and intuition, to actively listen to how these states interact with the real. According to these reflections, emotional states influence not what we see, but how we see it, how we frame what we see, and as such they are crucial vehicles of information on otherness and the real because external events resonate internally. Take for instance the emotional state of unease. In Balzac's short story, pain and cold are what guide the seeker to something of value, which is what becomes valuable to the spectator through their work. Filmmaker Pedro Costa refers to discomfort in terms of a specific type of fear that he experiences when he films someone, an emotional experience he has to make to access otherness (See more in the chapter: *Exotopic forms. Honouring the real*), and which he shares with other filmmakers (see for instance Figgis, 2007). According to film scholar Sarah Cooper, discomfort and suffering lie at the heart of the narrator's ethical responsibility towards otherness, the "fundamental starting point for the rupture of totalising thinking that takes us beyond ourselves, by opening to the infinite and, therefore, to others." (Cooper, 2010, p. 58). Emotions can orient artistic research as much as anthropologists. According to Marianella Sclavi, emotions in general, and uncomfortable

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<sup>22</sup> The Cambridge dictionary definition is: "to change the appearance of a person or thing very much, usually in an often spiritual way". The term was notoriously used in the bible, in the transfiguration of Jesus, an episode described in the New Testament where Jesus goes to a mountain (later called the Mount of Transfiguration) with some of his apostles to pray. Once on the top, Jesus is transfigured and becomes radiant in glory. This spiritual transformation manifests to the apostles as a change in appearance, and they describe it as a visible transformation (Matthew 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–13, Luke 9:28–36; and Peter (2 Peter 1:16–18).

feelings in particular, are a key state of being for the researcher's journey, one that alerts them that something of value is close to discovery in anthropological and sociological field research. In Sclavi's words: "otherness is not only outside of you but an essential part of you—your thoughts, your emotions, and your way of framing events". (Sclavi, 2012, p. 90, author's translation).<sup>23</sup> Does this mean that rigorous research is to be abandoned in favour of a personal account of subjective experiences? According to Scalvi: "We must choose between active and passive listening. Active listening does not require abandoning empirical observation; on the contrary, it demands a far more precise and reflective mode of observation—one that is attentive to details and forms, less driven by the urgency to classify or by the influence of common sense. It is a fully experimental observation, radical in its approach, and therefore, in the truest sense, a scientific observation." (Sclavi, 2012, p. 75, author's translation).<sup>24</sup> Following on Sclavi's consideration, active listening becomes crucial for the image-maker; and by active listening Sclavi means a type of attentive attunement that is oriented inwards as much as outwards, as the outer world resonates internally, and vice versa.

As these considerations suggest, in the physical and relational space between the researcher-filmmaker and the real, a meeting of subjectivities and objective elements—both material and immaterial, visible and invisible—takes place, some of which may be perceived subtly beyond what is strictly observable. To investigate these elusive encounters and clashes, we can draw on the tools of Visual Culture: the notions of *scopic regime*, apparatus (or environment), the gaze, and the image. The *interplay* of these elements, as Cometa described it (Cometa, 2016 a), and the concept of the *pictorial turn* developed by W.J.T. Mitchell (Mitchell, 2017), who first introduced the notion of *meta-picture* (Mitchell, 2017), allows scholarship to critically re-engage with images across time and rewrite their history in a way that unfolds through successive *scopic regimes* that, by renewing the relationships between viewers, authors and images through previously unknown gazes and apparatuses, "require the conscious development of new visual literacies" (Cometa, 2020, p. 12).

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<sup>23</sup> Scalvi wrote: "“gli altri’ non sono solo fuori di te, ma parte fondamentale di te, del tuo pensiero, delle tue emozioni, del tuo modo di inquadrare gli eventi” (Sclavi, 2012, p. 90).

<sup>24</sup> Scalvi wrote: "dobbiamo scegliere fra l’ascolto attivo e quello passivo. L’ascolto attivo non richiede di abbandonare l’osservazione empirica, al contrario richiede una modalità di osservazione molto più accurata e riflessiva, attenta ai particolari e alle forme, meno soggetta all’urgenza classificatoria e all’influenza del senso comune. È osservazione sperimentale in modo pieno, radicale. E quindi osservazione scientifica in modo pieno, radicale". (Sclavi, 2012, p. 75).

To explore the space between the researcher-author and the field of research in the ways as suggested by Sclavi's considerations discussed above (Sclavi, 2012), we can frame the fundamental notions of visual culture of apparatus, gaze and images as *environment*, *perceptual points*, and *meta-images (in dialogue with meta-pictures)*. As anticipated above, Maurice Merleau-Ponty has explored the gaze as a perceptual point (Merleau-Ponty, 1989). Giorgio Agamben, building on Michel Foucault's notion of *dispositif*, extends and refines Foucault's idea, providing a broader and more ontological analysis of how apparatuses function within modern societies. Agamben begins by defining *apparatuses* as material and immaterial structures that organize and govern human behavior. He follows Foucault's definition, which includes institutions (prisons, schools, governments), mechanisms (surveillance, bureaucracy), and even more abstract forms like language, knowledge, and economic systems; extending this definition to include any system or device that shapes human subjectivity, Agamben argues that our entire existence is now deeply embedded in apparatuses, from smartphones to social media, and from economic systems to ideological structures (Agamben, 2008). In other words, this framework suggests that apparatuses might be viewed as visible and invisible webs of dialogical relations, or, in a word, environments, both real and virtual (Agamben, 2008). The concept of meta-images expands Mitchell's notion of the meta-picture to include the immaterial meta-images that viewers and authors visualise as they engage with any one image. While a meta-picture emerges "whenever a picture appears within another picture" or when any material image "is employed as a device to reflect on the nature of pictures" (Mitchell, 2017, p. 75, author's translation), a meta-image materialises in the viewer's mind as they contemplate a meta-picture. It also emerges in the space between the images composing a meta-picture or between different meta-pictures juxtaposed side by side. Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* is a prime example of this dialogue at play, where the black canvas—the space between images—generates meta-visual short circuits (Cometa, 2020, pp. 154-173; Warburg, 2002). Meta-images continuously engage with both material images and immaterial ones, such as those shaped by imagination and memory. In addition to these two repositories—one collective, the other individual—there is a third cohort of images: the private collection of elective representations uniquely archived in each individual's consciousness/subconscious mind derived from their subjective experience. When considering meta-images, the intricate network of relationships between apparatuses-environments, gazes as perceptual points, and images resembles an intricate web

of dialogues between subjective perceptions and the objective dimensions of reality—what we might envision as an *ecology of perceptual points in dialogue with the real*.

To understand the complexity at play, consider the following examples. In his autobiographical nonfiction novel *Yoga*, Emmanuel Carrère recounts his hospitalisation at Paris' Saint Germain hospital following a severe depressive episode triggered by bipolar disorder. A poster of a marina by Raoul Dufy, typically seen as serene and meditative, becomes for him a nightmarish image that haunts his recovery; Carrère describes it as “the most horrible image in the world”, permanently associated with “unbearable emotions” (Carrère, 2020, pp. 192-193, author’s translation). Upon awakening from electroshock therapy, Carrère repeatedly finds himself staring at the painting, unable to avoid it. What Hawkins would describe as Carrère’s “state of consciousness”, shaped by his mental and emotional condition, determines how he perceives the image—his experience of the *Marina* is inscribed within his inner state rather than derived from raw sensory input (Hawkins, 2006; Hawkins, 2008; Hawkins, 2012). Carrère’s state of consciousness determines not only his emotions but also his scopic experience and his relationship with the *marina*, shaping the meta-images it evokes, suggesting the significance of considering the hypothesis of consciousness as a critical mediating element of perceptions and lived experiences.

A similar phenomenon unfolds in the autobiographical novel *When Rabbit Howls* (1987), written by *The Troops for Truddi Chase* in collaboration with psychologist Robert A. Phillips Jr. After being diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder and deeply engaging in psychotherapeutic processes, Chase recounts her life in the novel through her ninety-two different personalities, collectively known as “The Troops”. The book delves into Chase's experiences with dissociative identity disorder, a condition that developed as a defense mechanism against the severe sexual and physical abuse she endured from her stepfather beginning at the age of two. The narrative unfolds as Chase seeks therapy to address unexplained blackouts, anxiety, and mood swings. Through these sessions, she uncovers the existence of her multiple personalities, each formed to shield her from the traumatic memories of her past. Unlike traditional approaches to dissociative identity disorder, Chase and her therapist choose not to integrate these personalities in a singular, authoritative voice; instead, they work towards fostering cooperation among “The Troops”, allowing them to function collectively as well as independently. Written from the perspectives of her various identities, each with their own writing style, emotional state, behavior, and even physical

symptoms the book provides a profound insight into the fragmented world of a multiple personality system. As Phillips observed in the introduction to the book, Chase's voice, posture, and medical conditions changed consistently with each shift of personality during their therapeutic sessions over the years, suggesting that the fragmentation of the personality leads to divergent ways of experiencing the same events even when they are lived through the same embodied and situated subjectivity. A way to explain these experiences is to resort once again to the concept of states of consciousness, which D. R. Hawkins describe as the emotional and intellectual filters that, by mediating the relationship between any one subjectivity and reality, sets the boundaries of possibilities of the individual experience until the given level of consciousness is transcended, which can happen in any length of time from seconds to a lifetime, depending on the individual level of awareness and capacity to let go of the thoughts, feelings and experiences that are associated with that given level of consciousness (Hawkins, 2006; Hawkins, 2008; Hawkins, 2012).

Showing the complex interplay between perception, experience, and representation, subjectivity and objectivity, meta-images and meta-pictures, these considerations raise the controversial argument that a theory of consciousness is essential to fully understand these relations. Traditionally, science has struggled with this notion, as it seeks objective explanations, while consciousness remains subjective.<sup>25</sup> Philosopher David Chalmers (1996) differentiates between "easy problems"—which address the brain's functions in relation to reality—and "hard problems", which involve explaining why subjective experience exists at

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<sup>25</sup> Throughout the 20th century, this divide led fields like psychology and social sciences to focus on behavior, while neuroscience and medicine studied the brain, often dismissing consciousness as irrelevant to scientific inquiry. However, from the 1990s onward, researchers increasingly recognized the need to address consciousness directly. Francis Crick, advocating a neural-correlates approach, and Roger Penrose, proposing a controversial quantum theory of consciousness, both argued that science could no longer ignore this fundamental issue, contributing to the emergence of Consciousness Studies as a growing interdisciplinary field. See Crick, F., and Koch, C. (1990). "Towards a neurobiological theory of consciousness". *Seminars in the Neurosciences*, 2, 263–275; and Penrose, R. (1994). *Shadows of the Mind: A Search for the Missing Science of Consciousness*. Oxford University Press.

all.<sup>26</sup> This debate has profound implications for how we understand the relations between vision, framing, representation, experience, perception, and, ultimately, culture.<sup>27</sup> Understanding the science of perception therefore necessitates grappling with the philosophy of consciousness—a challenge that continues to push the boundaries of both disciplines. If consciousness shapes experience, then what we see, and our representations of the real, are interpretations of the real, mediated by our internal states; consequently, the author's states of consciousness and their dynamic evolution are what orient their positionings in the time-space, and what documentary forms reveal of the author; what Wenders associates with the notion that every image reveals not only what lies in front of the camera but also who lies behind it; as Klee wrote: "All paths converge in the eye and, transformed into form from their point of intersection, lead to a synthesis of external vision and inner contemplation." (Klee, 2004, p. 29, author's translation).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Chalmers argues that consciousness must become an "anomaly to be integrated" into science, much like time, space, and mass, proposing that if consciousness cannot be explained using existing scientific principles, it must be treated as a fundamental element of nature, requiring the discovery of its governing laws; in contrast, other scholars such as Daniel Dennett propose that subjective experience is an illusion, advocating for a strictly materialist, behaviorist approach focused on measurable brain functions. (Chalmers, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> At the time of writing this chapter, the University of Berkeley (USA, California) renamed the course "History of Culture" to "History of Consciousness" reflecting the significance of a theory of consciousness for the study of culture.

<sup>28</sup> Translated from: "Tutte le vie si incontrano nell'occhio e conducono, convertite in forma a partire dal loro punto di incrocio, alla sintesi di visione esterna e contemplazione interiore." (Klee, 2004, p. 29).

### 3. Multidimensionality

From 2014 to 2017, documentary filmmaker Stefano Savona—known for documentary films such as *Primavera in Kurdistan* (2002), *Tahrir: Liberation Square* (2011) and *Samouni Road* (2018)—taught at the the National Italian Film School for Documentary Film in Palermo, Italy (*Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia*). During this time, he introduced an innovative exercise for students: they were given two weeks to produce, shoot, and edit a short documentary focusing on an unremarkable, unnamed square within the Cantieri Culturali alla Zisa, located behind the school's headquarters. Despite all students documenting the same location, each film offered a unique perspective on the square. One student concentrated on a decaying pigeon behind a tree, capturing the proliferation of larvae, ants, and other insects dissecting the carcass and transporting fragments around the square's perimeter. Another drew inspiration from the iconic floating plastic bag scene in Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999), filming leaves carried by the wind across the space. Yet another student utilized black-and-white imagery to highlight the square's brutalist architectural features, emphasizing its stark, functionalist aesthetics. Collectively, these short films transformed the mundane square into a rich tapestry of diverse experiences, each evoking distinct emotions and reflections in the viewer. When viewed sequentially, they presented a mosaic of perspectives that simultaneously served as faithful representations of the space and subjective, opaque interpretations.

Documentary images often claim a closer relationship to truth than fiction films or staged photographs; however, examining where, how, and why they engage with reality reveals a complex and nuanced relationship. Films such as Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1990), Brian De Palma's *Redacted* (2007), and Peter Jackson's *Forgotten Silver* (1995) deconstruct the assumption that documentary images directly correspond to reality and truth. These films highlight how deploying documentary styles in films differs from creating images with the intention to document the real. As these examples demonstrate, a documentary style of storytelling establishes a slippery pact of credibility with the spectator, one that is even less transparent and clear than with fictional images. Is it true? Is it real? These questions

persistently engage the spectator, propelling the narrative forward. Similarly, cinema has extended the relevance of these ambiguities by testing boundaries across documentary and fictional cinematic forms. As Dottorini (2019) has shown, at its origins, the moving image was born under the influences of an interest for capturing reality (the documentary images of the Lumière brothers) as well as of its mystification (the experimentations of Georges Méliès). From early on in the history of cinema, documentary and fiction have intersected; see, for example, the staged scenes in *Nanook of the North* (1922) by Robert Joseph Flaherty. Cinema has always shown how fragments of truth can be found in documentary images as much as in fictional representations. *Pickpocket* (1959) by Robert Bresson made visible the real intimate routines, obsessions and gestures of a fictional character, a professional thief. Likewise, Balsamo and Pannone (2010) illustrated how certain fiction films, such as Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), are able to make visible some of the emotional and psychological labyrinths of the human minds of real characters—in this case, the two teen murderers responsible for the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 in Colorado—in a deeper way than a documentary film about the same events, namely Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002). These examples show that the question of truth remains latent in every image, documentary or fictional.

It can happen that the purpose and power of images lie not in what the images offer to the eye, but in what they take away from it. In *Grizzly Man* (2005), director Werner Herzog profoundly conveys the tragic death of Timothy Treadwell and his girlfriend Amie Huguenard by listening to the audio recordings of the moment they were attacked by grizzly bears, but the audience never hears it. Herzog's reaction in the scene is deeply emotional; he grimaces and eventually stops the playback, visibly shaken by what he hears. This moment forces the audience to imagine the violence of their deaths without explicit imagery. Herzog contrasts his own view of nature's brutality with Treadwell's sentimental perspective, stating that he sees “the law of survival, written in blood”. This raises ethical questions about representation in documentary filmmaking and whether Herzog honored Treadwell's vision—a question perhaps only Treadwell could have answered, but one worth considering. Sometimes, images of the real can provide seductive aesthetic forms that divert the attention of the viewer from their documenting nature, or they can serve as bricks to visual labyrinths that trap audiences in the aesthetic sphere of images, preventing them from accessing their other dimensions of meanings. Wim Wenders for instance argues that lacquered and aesthetically impeccable

images can be “stratagems to conceal” (Wenders, 2022, p. 65); in his film *Nick's Movie: Lightenings on the Water* (1984), Wenders explains that polished images are a derivative of the director's fear, their sense of powerlessness towards uncertainty and feelings of inadequacy.

As these examples show, a documentarian gaze can influence fictional representations as much as a novelistic approach can shape documentary images. Any scripted fiction film or staged photograph shows something of the real; in the same way, documentary images cannot be free of the presence of staged elements, one of the reasons being that filming equipment and troupes, no matter how small and non-intrusive, cannot help but to generate some level of performativity. Images result from layered interactions between optical devices, gazes, other images, and reality (Cometa, 2020); they emerge as a conflictual and heterogeneous “space for negotiations” between the various instances of modernity, including numerous subjectivities (Casetti, 2020, p.11). Moreover, documentary forms attempt at representing a dynamic real. Let us consider once again the metaphor of truth as a three-dimensional polygonal dice that we introduced at the beginning of this chapter; when asked to picture truth, the mind tends to visualise it as a still object, when it is actually constantly changing, like a geometrical figure that is in the process of continuously transforming into new shapes, as additional faces appear while others cease to exist. Reality is a process of constant becoming, and so is truth; neither exists as fixed dimensions. Immersed in transient experiences of transformation, the mind struggles to grasp this level of dynamism, and instead seeks to comprehend the real as a series of fixed points (ironically, cinema technically mirrors this attitude of the mind, as a camera captures immobile frames, usually twenty-four frames per second, and the mind fills in the gaps to create the illusion of moving images).

Following these considerations, attempts at classifying documentary forms and modalities into rigid categories seem destined to struggle. Consider the classic theoretical framework for documentary modalities devised by Bill Nichols in 1991 (Nichols, 1991). Nichols’ efforts initially identified four modes of documentary making -expository, reflexive, observational and participatory. Then, upon recognising that “things change. The four modes of documentary production that presented themselves as an exhaustive survey of the field no longer suffice.” (1994, p. 93), Nichols expanded his genealogical map to include, to date, two additional categories- poetic and performative (Nichols, 2014). As scholars have shown, for example Bruzzi, hybrid contemporary documentaries struggle to fit into Nichols’ widely

accepted genealogy of documentary (Bruzzi, 2006). Given that Nichols' diagram has proven incredibly valuable to better comprehend the fundamental forms of documentary cinema, one may consider that other and more fluid categories ought to be found to properly map the latest experimentations with documentary forms. As Hongisto seems to suggest, our struggle to let go of fixity in relation to reality is one of the obstacles we encounter in finding adequate categories to understand documentary forms; in her framework, documentary forms are neither true nor real, but alive, and the inevitable overlapping of fiction and reality require the fabrication of new categories of analysis, such as *fabulation*, a term borrowed from literary criticism where it has been used to indicate 20th century novels that resemble magical realism, and that fail to adhere to the traditional categories of pure realism or fiction (see for instance *The fabulators* by Robert E. Scholes (1967), (Hongisto, 2015).

However, when looking at documentary forms through the lenses of Bakhtin's dialogism, images appear inherently multidimensional, as Marin's reflections on their reflexive and transitive dimensions also suggested; this multidimensional quality determines their capacity to adhere to many modalities at once, and to none fully. Like in a building with many opaque floors, one can choose to focus their attention and analysis on one dimension over the other, but all coexist simultaneously in the image and interact with one another in potentially infinite ways. If not investigated, the floors of meaning, for instance the ones that claim to hold a closer proximity to truth, objectivity and evidence, can obfuscate judgement and perception. To conclude, while an objective reality exists, documentary images do not always convey it straightforwardly; objectivity is transformed through the subjective interpretation of authors, leading to diverse portrayals of truth. Terms like *multidimensionality* and *intersubjectivity* highlight the complex interplay between creators and reality in crafting these images. Building upon these considerations, our exploration looks at some of these dimensions- transitive, reflexive, performative, ethical and their interrelations. Rather than providing an exhaustive list of defining characteristics or a rigid framework, this discussion aims to offer a starting point for contemplating and experiencing images of reality as dynamic and multidimensional objects.

Documentary images unquestionably show fragments of the real; however what is real is questionably universally true, as it is usually true from a specific, situated and subjective perspective- a gaze. In other words, the transitive dimension of documentary representations has a problematic relationship with truth because it is inextricably interconnected with the

reflexive dimension of representation. As Dottorini writes of contemporary documentary cinema: “The gaze captures the fluidity of identities, the captivating force of those who construct their own worldview and self-concept, moving and existing both within and beyond their own fictions.” (Dottorini, 2019, p. 21, author’s translation).<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the reflexive dimension is not limited to the act of framing- the presence of the author’s gaze is inevitable, and it leaves traces not only in the way of framing reality, but also in choosing to tell a specific story. Take for example the documentary feature *87 Ore* by Costanza Quatriglio (2015), an authorial take on the last four days of Francesco Mastrogiovanni's life, an elementary school teacher, who was taken by the police and interned in a psychiatric ward for a suspected psychotic crisis. The use of surveillance camera footage allows the viewer to cross the hospital walls and learn what is usually entrusted only to the memory of those present; the film becomes a painful and frightening account of otherwise invisible events, in which responsibilities and omissions reveal the cruel face of Italian healthcare.

Furthermore, the gaze is not the sole factor influencing the dialogue between reality, subjectivity and documentary representation; the mediation of technical apparatuses—such as photographic or filming equipment—also plays a crucial role. These devices have historically served as tools to reinterpret and expand reality, rather than merely recording it 'as it is'. As Casetti observes, “cinema redeems one of our senses (vision) and gives it back to us enhanced” (Casetti, 2020, p. 21, author’s translation). Until recently, these apparatuses were limited to capturing images within the capabilities of the human eye. Advancements in technology have now enabled them to surpass these limitations. For instance, the Netflix series *Night on Earth: Shot in the Dark* (2020) unveils the natural world after sunset, utilizing advanced filming equipment capable of recording in low-light conditions. Overcoming the absence of light is a particularly transformative development for photography. Historically, the existence of a photograph was determined by the duration the photosensitive medium or film was exposed to light; once the shutter closed, the moment was captured. In conditions of insufficient light, images could not be revealed through the film and remained unseen. Now, new technical possibilities extend beyond the limitations of human vision. Moreover, technology not only enhances visibility but also alters its quality, thereby influencing human

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<sup>29</sup> Dottorini wrote: “lo sguardo coglie il fluttuare delle identità, la forza affabulatoria di chi costruisce la propria idea del mondo e di se stesso, di muoversi e di esistere all'interno e all'esterno delle proprie finzioni.” (Dottorini, 2019, p. 21).

perception of truth and reality. When a new apparatus shows us what we normally can't see, it doesn't just report what's on the other side: it processes it. Night-time images, for example, are manipulated versions of reality, crafted for the human eye by devices adept in low-light conditions.

The interplay between the reflexive and transitive dimensions of documentary images also evolves over time and within varying contexts. At the same time, filmmakers develop their unique *ways of seeing*, influenced by cultural and societal impulses, and express these perspectives through the available film and photography equipment. Consequently, documentary images embody a subjective gaze that is both individual and collective, situated within the *scopic regimes* of their times. For example, in *At Berkeley* (2013), director Frederick Wiseman presents his personal perspective on the renowned West Coast academic institution, while also revealing how contemporary society views Berkeley, both directly and indirectly (see a more detailed discussion on Wiseman's work in the chapter *Exotopic forms. Honouring the real*). Documentary images can also acquire meanings that transcend the original intentions of their creators, influenced by the contexts in which they are viewed. For instance, an anthropological perspective doesn't preclude images from eliciting emotional responses in viewers. Some images intended to deepen anthropological research or document global events have become remarkable works of art, and conversely, images created for entertainment purposes can end up documenting aspects of reality. Consider the short film *Stendali* (1960), directed by Cecilia Mangini, with a voice-over text written by Pier Paolo Pasolini. The film's central sequence depicts funeral chants performed by a group of women in southern Puglia, Italy, following the premature death of one of their sons. Mangini's approach is deeply influenced by anthropology; she was inspired by the studies of anthropologist Ernesto De Martino on the survival of ancient performative funeral rituals in southern Italy after World War II. Her attentive focus reveals clear anthropological intentions: the sequence is filmed with a non-fixed camera that captures the ritual scene without unnecessary interruptions, maintaining a consistent distance from the chanting women. Mangini's filming approach is free from empty authorial pretensions, and the camera's consistent distances prevent excessive photographic distortions of the women's faces, hands, and bodies. Through this essentialist, humble, and horizontal filming approach, despite the underlying anthropological interest, the film remains an astonishingly poetic work. Clearly, credit is due to Pasolini's lyrical text. Nevertheless, even with the sound muted, the images

still inspire both curiosity and emotion in the viewer. As this example shows, despite all efforts to become a “fly on the wall”, the presence of a film crew, no matter how small, cannot be ignored, and it supposedly influences reality to some extent; it follows that every documentary image has a performative dimension.

Performativity in documentary filmmaking, however, typically refers to the deliberate use of performative elements—such as reenactments, staged scenes, and subjective interventions—to engage with subjects, convey emotions, and challenge traditional notions of objectivity and realism. These techniques blur the lines between fiction and nonfiction, emphasizing the filmmaker's perspective and highlighting the constructed nature of the narrative. Notably, Joshua Oppenheimer used re-enactment in his film *The Act of Killing* (2012), where he asked mass murderer, Anwar Congo, and his friends, to stage for the camera the murders they committed during the 1960s Indonesian genocide; the presence of the camera revealed the complexity of human contradictions by allowing their excitement and sense of importance to come forth as they performed their atrocious gestures, while capturing traces of shame and war guilt as they resurfaced. Alessandra Celesia used re-enactment in her recent documentary film *The flats* (2024), where she asks a group of Catholic, working class residents of a block of flats in Belfast to revisit in front of the camera some of the violent traumas that have marked their lives, starting from Joe and his involvement in the 1980s Northern Irish struggles. Documentarians may choose to engage with the world through subjective interventions or performative takes on reality, either because the themes of the film suggest it or because of the aesthetic power of staged images, or both. See for example the staged scenes in *Pina* (2011) or the set interview with photographer José Salgado in *The Salt of the Earth* (2014), both by Wim Wenders. Bill Nichols, in *Introduction to documentary* had identified the performative mode as one that emphasises “the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker's engagement with the subject” and seeks to evoke an emotional response rather than just convey information (Nichols, 2014, p. 50, author's translation). Then, in *New documentary. A critical introduction* (2006), Stella Bruzzi challenged traditional notions of documentary as a purely observational or expository medium by emphasising its inherently performative nature; as she puts it: “Documentary is predicated upon the tension between actuality and performance” (Bruzzi, 2006, p.4); in Bruzzi's view, performative documentaries often foreground the presence of the filmmaker, making them an integral part of the narrative.

This reflexivity acknowledges the constructed nature of the documentary and highlights the filmmaker's role as a mediator rather than an invisible observer.

The performative, transitive and reflexive dimensions of documentary forms are in a constant, dynamic dialogue with their ethical dimension. As anticipated, documentary images navigate the tension between engaging audiences and adhering to evolving and often contraposing ethical standards. To be relevant, documentary images must oftentimes deal with painful aspects of the human experience, and in doing so, they make ethical dilemmas surface. A controversial theme that documentary images sought to represent where the ethical dimension of images collapses on the reflexive, performative and transitive dimensions, is that of the end of life. Consider *Fire at Sea* (2016) by Gianfranco Rosi, particularly the sequence showing the lifeless bodies of migrants on a lifeboat off the coast of Lampedusa, and the extent to which these images raised debates around the award-winning film at Berlin Film Festival at the time of its release. Documentary filmmaker and film scholar Steven Eastwood investigated the relationship between documentary aesthetics and ethics in *The interval and the instant. Inscribing death and dying* (Eastwood, 2016). In the article, Eastwood reflects on his own experience of documenting the end of life in the documentary film *Island* (2017), which follows four terminal patients in a palliative care facility on the Isle of Wight in the United Kingdom. Filmed over twelve months, *Island* is, in Eastwood's words, "a life-affirming reflection on the phenomena of dying, portraying the transition away from personhood and observing the last days and hours of life and the moment of death".<sup>30</sup> In one of the most unsettling and enigmatic sequences of the film, Eastwood, through a twelve-minute long sequence shot, frames the last minutes of life of one of the terminal patients he has been following with the camera, raising questions on whether there is an ethical way of representing the end of life as it happens. What might make the sequence bearable to some lies not in its content but on the authorial formal choices behind it. First, because of his affectionate proximity, full access and ease of movement, the film shows that Eastwood has established a relationship of trust with his witnesses; as Eastwood explains in interviews following up with the film's release, the patients had not only given full consent to filming but were also directly and completely engaged with the project of the film while in the making.<sup>31</sup> Second, Eastwood frames his witness from a specific distance that is close

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<sup>30</sup>From Steven Eastwood's webpage, available at: <https://www.steveneastwood.co/island>, last accessed: February 2025.

<sup>31</sup> See Steven Eastwood's webpage for further references.

enough to mirror their affectionate relationship, and distant enough to not intrude it; and third, by choosing to shoot a sequence shot, he relinquishes editorial control. Albeit unsettling to most viewers, the sequence raises thoughts regarding the taboo that surrounds the end of life and its representations in contemporary culture, and asks whether there are ways to represent it respectfully or permissibly. In *Nick's movie. Lightnighs over water* (1980), Wim Wenders, in collaboration with director Nicholas Ray, documents Ray's last days of life, presenting a raw and intimate portrayal of his decline. Wenders captures the unfolding effects of a painful and fatal disease on a fragile and vulnerable person with his total consent, improvising the film day by day, navigating between exhibitionism and escape; given its content, the film borders on voyeurism, exposing Ray's vulnerability to satisfy the audience's most morbid gaze. Shifting the attention from the transitive dimension of the image - what it shows - to the ethical-aesthetic and reflective ones - how it chooses to show the end of life, and which self-reflexive gaze it reveals - it can be noted that Wenders looks at Ray's vulnerability with innocence and respect, relating to the director like a student would to an eminent sage who has come to master not only filmmaking, but also life and death. Wender's respectful fascination towards a master later returns in the film *Tokyo-Ga*, a 1985 documentary about Japanese filmmaker Yasujirō Ozu, in which Wenders revisits Ozu's approach to filmmaking through interviews with Ozu's cinematographer, Yuharu Atsuta, and one of Ozu's most recurrent actors, Chishū Ryū, as well as diaristic scenes of his wanderings around contemporary Tokyo. Later, Wenders recalls this childlike gaze: "Children in my films are omnipresent, as if to represent a dreamlike gaze, as if they were the eyes my films would like to have. A look at the world far from any opinion, a completely ontological look" (Wenders, 2022, p. 67, author's translation). Of *Nick's movie*, Bertolucci said: "Just as all films about life inevitably end up evoking the idea of death, this film about death throws open all its doors and windows to a world of great vitality. (...) Wenders – and we with him – gradually becomes accustomed to the feeling of death and the oh-so-simple idea that even those of us who are making or watching the film are mortal. (...) I wonder why everything you see and hear in this film moved me so deeply. Nick is surrounded by friends, loved ones, memories; while Wim is terribly alone, silently blending into the décor... Sam Spade has realised that he is filming something which has never been filmed before, that which Proust, in his final words, called:

*l'immense frivolité des mourants*” (Bernardo Bertolucci in conversation with Wim Wenders, 1981, author’s translation).<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, the ethical dimension of documentary images reflects not only the relationships between authors, witnesses, their representations and audiences, but also their connections with the specific cultural and historical contexts in which they were created and reproduced, since the gaze operates not only from a given subjective and embodied point of view in time and space, but also within a specific cultural and temporal context. We cannot speak of the gaze without taking into account the existence of multiple gazes, each embodied and situated in its own contingency, each in dialogue with the *ways of seeing* of their time. Consider for instance Albrecht Dürer's engraving titled *Man Drawing a Reclining Woman* (1538), which was discussed by Martin Jay in *Scopic regimes of modernity* (Jay, 1988), and then by many visual culture scholars thereafter, becoming one of the most iconic and obsession-provoking image for scholars within this *undisciplined* field of studies (Cometa, 2020).<sup>33</sup> As the title indicates, the engraving depicts a male artist in an academic environment engaged in the drawing of a female model who is exposing her nudity to his gaze. The artist’s eyes study, dissect and filter the female figure through two instruments of the time, an Albertian perspective grid and a draftsman's pyramid, that is a drawing tool that forces a monocular vision since the artist using it must close one eye to align the pyramid with the grid. As Jay proposes, the artist's gaze does not rest objectively and neutrally on the semi-naked body of the model; it is an embedded, historicised, and situated gaze which cannot be separated from the context in which it operates, namely an art academy in the XVI century, or the optical apparatuses available at the time. Following Mulvey's theoretical framework of the male gaze, introduced in her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” to examine how visual arts position women as objects of male desire, as well as Haraway's discussions on situated knowledges, with which Haraway critiques the “conquering gaze from nowhere” highlighting how perspectives in art and science often reflect dominant, male-centric viewpoints, we can frame Dürer's engraving as exemplifying a masculine, objectifying gaze that seeks to know and control the female by dominating and quite literally decomposing a semi-nude female

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<sup>32</sup> Conversazione tra Bernardo Bertolucci e Wim Wenders, organizzata e introdotta da Enrico Ghezzi. Roma, 1981. Disponibile su Rai Teche.

<sup>33</sup> From the second edition of Dürer's *Underweysung der Messung or Work about the Art of Drawing* (Nuremberg, 1538). Reprinted in *Archeologie del dispositivo. Regimi scopici della letteratura* by Michele Cometa, Cosenza: Pellegrini, 2016.

body (Mulvey, 1975; Haraway, 1988, p. 581). The body is laid back in a seductive pose and the scene follows the most conventional gendered power dynamic script, showing a female subject offering her nudity to the gaze of a male protagonist in a dominant position- the male artist is the one with the pencil at hand while she is being drawn; he is looking at her while she is being looked at. In the same way, Dürer's gaze does not reflect the real, but frames it within his cultural and individual perspective, which is influenced by the temporal and spatial context he inhabits, the situated social structure and ethical compass of his time. These reflections suggest that contextual premises not only determine, at least to some extent, the boundaries and possibilities of the subjective gaze, but also influence the ways in which images are reinterpreted as these cultural frames change.

As these considerations suggest, the dynamic nature of documentary images entails that ethical and aesthetic dimensions continually interact and transform as times and contexts change. Consider for instance once again the photographic work of Dorothea Lange, a modest urban photographer who captured rural America's plight during the Great Depression, profoundly shaping the nation's visual memory of that era. Despite the impact of her work, Lange received minimal financial reward and recognition during her lifetime. Notably, in October 2005, her early documentary photograph, *White Angel Breadline*—depicting men queuing for food at a San Francisco soup kitchen—sold at Sotheby's for \$822,400, marking the second-highest price ever paid for a photograph at that time (McCord, 2005). Lange might have appreciated the belated acclaim, yet she would likely have questioned the transformation of an image of destitute individuals into a luxury commodity. This raises ethical concerns about the “beautification of suffering”, where portraying hardship in an aesthetically pleasing manner can desensitize viewers to the depicted realities. As Susan Sontag observed, “Beautifying is one classic operation of the camera, and it tends to bleach out a moral response to what is shown.” (Sontag, 2003, p. 86). In our digital age, enhancing images of adversity to make them visually appealing risks trivializing genuine hardship; as Sontag warns, while artists may aim to raise awareness, they must tread carefully to avoid exploiting their subjects' pain; therefore, it's crucial to approach the depiction of suffering with sensitivity and empathy, ensuring that such representations foster understanding rather than mere aesthetic appreciation (Sontag, 2003). Lange did not create *White Angel Breadline* to embellish a luxurious private property. Nevertheless, its buyer might have chosen to spend a large sum of money to own it because of its aesthetic value. The meaning of an image

depicting an uncomfortable experience may convey a different meaning and evoke a distinct reaction depending on where it is proposed, whether in a museum or on a t-shirt. Similarly, W. Eugene Smith's 1971 photograph, commonly known as *Tomoko and Mother in the Bath*, which portrays the tragic effects of pollution to human health, was withdrawn from reproduction in 1997. As we will discuss in detail in the chapter *Exotopic forms. Honouring the real*, while the photograph authentically portrays the harrowing effects of Minamata disease, it also involves performative elements, as it was carefully posed and lit to evoke a composition reminiscent of Michelangelo's *Pietà*; initially published in *Life* magazine and later in the book *Minamata* (1975), the photograph became emblematic of environmental pollution's human toll; however over time, its widespread reproduction on various media led to ethical concerns, prompting Aileen Mioko Smith, the copyright holder, to honor the family's new wishes and withdraw it from further publication in 1997, two decades after Tomoko's death. Smith, however, continued to allow the image to be displayed at photographic exhibitions in the following years.

These examples show the intricate relationship between ethics and aesthetics in documentary filmmaking, as well as how creative choices can both honor and challenge ethical considerations. Audiences, filmmakers, and subjects often hold divergent views on what and how to represent reality in documentaries, and determining definitive answers to these questions is challenging, as the most critical ethical considerations are often navigated by the filmmakers and participants directly involved in the creation process; this is why they are the only fully legitimate holders of the copyright to their representations. These ethical dilemmas become even more intricate when they stem from conflicting ethical imperatives across different times and cultures. What was deemed ethical decades ago may no longer hold true today; similarly, ethical standards can vary significantly across cultural contexts. Therefore, any meaningful discussion on documentary ethics necessitates a multidimensional approach that dynamically embraces diverse perspectives.

## 4. Synchronicity

The implicit assumption behind the relationship between documentary authors and the real they represent is that of causality. Consider, for instance, the encounter that takes place between image-makers, in particular their gaze, and the perpetual becoming of real through the act of framing; in the previous section titled *Multidimensionality* we have discussed how, as authors film the real, they engage with its transformations in a way that dialogically imprints a form on documentary images that, excluding the intervention of artificial intelligences, is difficult to manipulate in its core at the post production stage; if we situate this process within the paradigm of cause and effect, the filmmakers' choices act like causes that result in more or less predictable effects that are visible in the film's form. As we have seen, applying Bakhtin's reflections on the dialogic principle to documentary filmmaking challenges this framework, proposing instead that documentary authors engage in dialogic relationships with the real that result in multidimensional representations. In this section, we propose to explore this dialogic relationship more in depth and through a different declination of the dialogic principle, one that relates to the dimensions of time and space, and how they connect to the subjective perception of authors and viewers. In order to do so, suppose that the relationship between authors and the real is not causal but acausal, or synchronic.

Elaborated between 1951 and 1952, Carl Gustav Jung's concept of synchronicity investigates an alternative type of relationship to causality to explain how events "connect in the world of chance, where a chance event seems causally unconnected with the coinciding fact" (Jung, 2023 a, p. 4446, paragraph 823). According to Jung, the phenomenon of synchronicity refers to the close connection between the archetypal inner vision of the human unconscious, and physical events that occur outside of the human mind (Jung, 2023 a). In his view, the relationship between the conscious mind and the subconscious manifests in the world through synchronicities, which Jung describes as "meaningful coincidences"- experiences that the mind reads as linked together as a "peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers." (Jung in Wilhelm, 1948, p. 12, author's translation). In Jung's view, *synchronicities* are not mere

chance but rather reflect an underlying order or acausal linking between the inner world of the psyche, the subjective perception, and external events; he suggested that when an inner psychological state resonates with an external event, the resulting synchronicity can reveal deep personal or collective significance by revealing to the mind's awareness the otherwise hidden connection between its inner experiences and the outer world; hinting at a non-linear, symbolic order that underlies reality, through these elaborations Jung suggests that the relationship between the psyche and external events might not be exclusively causal, or based on the principle of cause and effect, but also synchronic, or based on a dialogic relationship where the psyche and the material world engage in the co-construction of meaning through synchronicities; in Jung's words: "Since psyche and matter are contained in one and the same world, and moreover are in continuous contact with one another and ultimately rest on irrepresentable, transcendental factors, it is not only possible but fairly probable, even, that psyche and matter are two different aspects of one and the same thing. The synchronicity phenomena point, it seems to me, in this direction, for they show that the nonpsychic can behave like the psychic, and vice versa, without there being any causal connection between them. Our present knowledge does not allow us to do much more than compare the relation of the psychic to the material world with two cones, whose apices, meeting in a point without extension- a real zero-point- touch and do not touch." (Jung, 2023 a, p. 4237, paragraph 418). Even though Jungian synchronicity describes a specific type of relationship the psyche and the real, the concept of synchronicity offers a perspective to explore the wider significance of the immediate co-existence of the real, the mind, and the dimensions of time and space; one from which to focus more on the configurations that events assume at the moment of observation, rather than on the causes that have determined them. In our explorations we propose to apply the synchronic perspective to two fundamental forms of authorial engagement with reality in documentary image-making: the act of framing the real, and the editing process. In the first section of the chapter titled *Connecting synchronicities. Attuning to the real* we will attempt to show how documentary filmmakers Depardon and Ristelhueber, in their film *San Clemente* (1982), filmed psychiatric patients with an handheld camera as if they were attached to them through an invisible string that made visible their unique attunement to their subjects; as we propose in relation to *San Clemente*, the metaphysical connection between authors and witnesses manifests through the form of the film; because of this, the film's finished form allows the image-makers themselves to learn more about their

own gaze. The crucial creative intervention through which authors give meaning to representation is montage; one of the ways in which montage creates meaning is establishing the time-space dimension in which the narration unfolds by juxtaposing images; as we will discuss in the second section of the aforementioned chapter in relation to Sara Fgaier's film *Gli anni* (2018), through the editing process, heterogeneous and "reused" materials can engage in a synchronic and resignifying dance that bring forth the new and unique vision of the author.

Through these two forms of involvement- framing and montage, authors create images and narratives; as they frame reality, they create a representation of the real, and as they edit images together, they make sense of representations by inscribing them a time-space context which is also a dialogical creation; what Bakhtin, in the realm of literature analysis, would call, borrowing from the terminology of relativistic physics, a *chronotope*, or the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin, 2008, p. 84).<sup>34</sup> Seeing these processes through synchronicity challenges the traditional coordinates of documentary filmmaking. Consider for instance how we tend to perceive documentary film directors in a leading position with respect to reality, as entities that have the power to decide over the film's form, the narration, and the way witnesses are represented, amongst other elements; as opposed to synchronicity, causality suggests a more unidirectional relationship between filmmakers and the real, which favours the idea of a neutral, objective, invisible, and external observer that is free from an attachment to reality; under these conditions, the proposed existence of an inherent imbalance of power between film directors and witnesses in documentary filmmaking becomes a natural consequence ( as previously discussed in *Multidimensionality*).

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<sup>34</sup> In Bakhtin's words: "We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature. (...) It is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time" (Bakhtin in Todorov, 1995, p. 84-85).

In the collection of essays *Cinema Interval*, documentary filmmaker and scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha explores the relationship between synchronicity, the gaze, and the physical and emotional encounter between the observer-filmmaker and the real (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1999). Minh-ha starts her reflections from the image of the ancient Chinese pictogram “间” (*jiān*), which encompasses meanings such as between, among, within a definite time or space, room, or lateral space between two pillars; in English is usually translated as interval, space, and partition.<sup>35</sup> The graphic representation of *jiān* shows the moon framed by a door or window, captured while it passes through the exact centre of the space inscribed. As Minh-ha notices, the Chinese concept of *jiān* describes the interval as a spatio-temporal notion that is linked to an implicit observer: the moment when a specifically situated gaze catches the moon as it aligns with the centre of a defined space; *jiān* illustrates both the ineffable synchronicity between the moon and the door, as well as that between the real and the observer (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1999) pp. xi-xiv). As Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, the concept of *jiān* is crucial in explaining the process of documentary filmmaking, as it describes the discovery of how one's own embodied perspective creates unique images in an ever changing reality (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1999) pp. xi-xiv). In Minh-ha's words: “From metamorphoses to metamorphoses, shadows to shadows, one is led, as the night mutates, to one's sudden encounter with one's own abyssal light: the wild self, the infinite self. In this (no) state of intense altered consciousness, one finds oneself being *of both*: of here and there, knowingly knowing not. The image of the moon in the doorway serenely summons up the opening of a passageway. Interval and partition, sleep and wake, wild and tamed, after all, are not a threat to each other when *spacing* is what every movement requires: what enters, exits; what dwells far in, travels far out. It is often said among the wolf people that life is an interval between birth and death—an interval hanging precariously between two seconds: one to die and another to break through.” (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1999, p. xiv). Within this vision of life as a fleeting interval between birth and death, what is documentary cinema if not a way to halt unstable moments, giving viewers the possibility to see unprecedented synchronicities that occur from the unique interaction of the real with novel *ways of seeing*, again and again?

To explore the concept of *jiān*, consider the ways in which it parallels the Japanese notion of *ma* (間), which also describes an impossible dimension of possibility where everythingness and nothingness meet. In Japanese culture, *ma* is represented as an imaginary room located

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<sup>35</sup> Collins Dictionary of Chinese Mandarin to English.

somewhere between heaven and earth; the room is placed in an abstract dimension where spatial and temporal coordinates are both uncertain and blurred (Sachiyo, 2010). The earliest pictograms for this term were constructed using, once again, signs that represented the moon or the sun setting within a gate, an image that resembles that of *jiān*; In *ma*, the infinite, heavenly world is seen through the limited frame of a finite, humanly opening. The concept refers to their seemingly unattainable encounter, a rare, synchronic expression of their integration. To make these synchronic occurrences visible, documentary image makers must enter the room of *ma*, where the whole- reality- and the residual- images of reality- strangely coexist. The sense of *ma* - of integration between the two - is created as the image makers blend subjectivity with adaptability, independence of thought and emotion with openness to reality. As they engage in this acausal, dialogical encounter, they document and invent reality, while also being transformed by it. The image that results out of this synchronic, bidirectional exchange is a document and an invention of both the reality it represents, and the transformation of the author.

If framing captures these synchronicities by making visible the unique spatio-temporal intervals where author and reality meet, the editing process creates the cartography of this territory and provides the viewer with a map to navigate it. During montage, the interval becomes the space of interaction between one image and the next, which creates the sense, rhythm and meaning of the film. Dziga Vertov introduces the term 'interval' to describe the cinema revolution through his 'interval theory', according to which cinema moves through interstices, spaces, and transitions. Vertov connects the notion of interval primarily with cinematic experimentation through montage; in Vertov's hall of intervals, the meaning of the film takes shape in the spaces between the temporal, spatial, visual and rhythmic elements, and it crystallises through the editing process. According to Vertov: "The material - the elements of the art of movement - is the intervals (the replacement of one movement by another) and not the movement itself. They (the intervals) lead the action to its cinematic resolution. The organisation of movement is the organisation of its elements, ie, the organisation of the intervals" (Vertov in Enzensberger, 1972 p. 100-101). Montani notes that Vertov emphasises that the essence of cinema lies not in reconstructing movement, but in creating a "concentrate" or transcription of it. This is achieved by organising sequences so that the relationship between shots becomes perceptible. The focus shifts from individual images or abstract movement to the construction of movement through the interplay of

images. Thus, the interval—the transition between shots—becomes a decisive element in cinematic language, allowing images to transcend isolation and movement to gain definition (Montani, 1975, p. 61). The same principle applies to photographic series; montage in these cases relates to the order of photographs, as well as to layout or exhibition settings. The interval is also what makes cinematography possible on a physical level, as the human mind literally transforms a series of still images into the illusion of movement by filling the blank gaps between them; likewise, on the metaphorical plane, cinematography moves through intervals that connect various realms: the verbal and the visual, sound and image, the visible real contained in the frame, and the invisible outside of it.

The reflections of Trinh T. Min-ha and Vertov encourage viewers to question the authoritative narratives often present in mainstream cinema and engage with films in a more active manner. As their considerations suggest, the concept of synchronic intervals applies to the act of framing as well as to the editing process; the interval is the liminal phenomenon that precedes the non-repeatable encounter between time, space and subjective perception, including the gaze; it could be imagined as a metaphysical transition at the threshold between full presence as complete awareness of the present, and the hypnosis that results from being in the infinite stream of external and internal events- the real, and the self's reactions to the real in the form of thoughts and emotions. We imagine to find intervals in-between images, but they might also exist in images as well, as the reflections on synchronic framing suggest; see the section *Synchronic framing. San Clemente (1980)*; through intervals, images exist in dialogue with their creator (and viewer), as well as with past and future images. In conclusion, the idea of synchronic intervals serves as a way to challenge cinematic conventions and open up space for a more nuanced understanding of representation through four key points: (1) non-linearity: intervals question the linear progression of a film's narrative, challenging viewers to make connections and derive meaning from the gaps and pauses between scenes or shots; the viewer that embraces non-linearity and recognises intervals is encouraged towards a more active and reflective mode of viewing; (2) multivocality and the dialogical principle: evoking Bakhtin's considerations on Dostoyevski's novels (Bakhtin, 1984), intervals allow for the coexistence of different voices and perspectives within the same film, challenging the dominance of a single, authoritative narrative voice; (3) sensory engagement: the interval can engage viewers on a sensory and affective level, as it encourages viewers to pay attention to the textures, sounds, and rhythms within the film, moving beyond a purely intellectual

engagement; and, (4) agency and subjectivity: the concept of interval brings attention to the active intersubjectivity of both the filmmaker and the viewer; it acknowledges that meaning-making is a collaborative process in which the viewer actively participates in, constructing meaning from the film. Hence, to see the relationship between image-makers, reality and representation as influenced by synchronicities that occur through cinematic intervals means to recognise an inherent uncertainty in the real that makes documentary filmmaking not a way to establish control over it, but one that explores how subjectivities and events interact dialogically in the co-construction of reality.

## 5. Exotopy

Documentary filmmakers often talk about how they feel called to listen to their witnesses. The act of attentively, consistently and actively listening becomes for many a working method. As filmmaker Garret Bradley argued during her artist talk at “Lo Schermo dell’Arte” in November 2024 in Florence, to film is to listen to the real; and to listen is to make others feel heard and seen, or in other words, to express love. For some, the listening process becomes a way to delve into oneself, and the film appears as a sort of filmic introspective journey; see for example documentary films that are shaped like a filmic diary, such as the notable *Diary* (1983) by David Perlov; *5 Broken Cameras* (2011), by Palestinian farmer Emad Burnat and Israeli filmmaker Guy Davidi; or *On Akka’s Afore* (2018), by Umama Hamido which we will further discuss in *Multidimensional truths. Representing the real*. In other cases, it becomes a means to dialogue with loved ones, either lost or living. See for instance Naomi Kawase’s *Katatsumori* (1994), a tender account of the filmmaker’s beloved grandmother’s daily life, and the last weeks they spend together before Kawase’s departure from home to live by herself; or Alina Marazzi’s *Un’ora Sola ti Vorrei* (2002), which reconstructs the life of her late mother through her grandfather’s fragmental home movies; Using voice-over narration, diary readings, and images of a family marked by great economic privilege and a carefree demeanor, the film attempts to give voice to someone who no longer desires to live; the family’s carefree happiness appears more staged than real, as the attentive listening of the director reveals. To others, the listening activity literally brings out the real self of the witness; see for example *Horse Being* (2016) by Jérôme Clément-Wilz, a poetic research on the transformation into a human horse of Karen, a 50-year-old transvestite, who in the film trains with an American cowboy to bring pony play in her life. In other cases, the listening process becomes a means to give voice to the oppressed. In the documentary film *Kamay* (2023), director Ilyas Yourish travels from Kabul University, where he studies, to the remote mountains of central Afghanistan, to visit a Hazara family, a historically oppressed ethnic group, that has mysteriously lost one of their daughters, Zahra, who was also a student at Kabul University. As he embarks on a journey for truth and justice, Yourish meets Zahra’s

younger sister, Freshta, and decides to tell the story of these investigations through her eyes and through her voice; freshta's voice-over guides the spectator through their difficult and long journeys to Kabul. Frame after frame, her grief transforms into unrelenting resistance, and echo of the fight of a people against hatred; the film becomes a moving contemplation of love, loss, and perseverance in spite of increasing unrest on the eve of the Taliban takeover of the country. With the full support of Zahra's family, Yourish puts his skills and equipment in service of the story- he becomes the empowerment means, the spark that ignites Freshta's desire to speak and contribute to giving voice to the Halara people. As Freshta commented at the premiere of the film at the 62° Festival dei Popoli in Florence in November 2024, the whole voice-over, which was recorded in a studio during the post-production of the film, is solely made out of her own words and writings, which the making of the film inspired.

These examples show how documentary film authors strive to capture the multiplicity of life's experiences, a pursuit that calls for an openness to perspectives beyond one's own. At the heart of this endeavor lies what can be described as an exotopic position, one that echoes Bakhtin's ideas of dialogue: a commitment to a listening position that is open towards recognising the existence of a dynamic interplay of voices, narratives, and cultural positions that co-create narratives. An exotopic stance in documentary work is not simply about representing reality as a fixed object, but about engaging in a constant dialogue with the world, a dialogue where every voice matters and every perspective opens up new possibilities for understanding the real. Although Bakhtin originated this idea, the term "exotopy" (or "exotopia") does not appear in Bakhtin's original writings; instead, it is a later coinage introduced by literary critics such as Todorov to capture the Bakhtinian idea of "outsidedness" or "the outside position of the author with respect to the hero" (a translation of the Russian term "*вненаходимость-vnenakhodimost'*").<sup>36</sup> The term has been translated in other languages, for instance Italian as *extra-locality* (for instance, in Italian is often translated as *extralocalità*).<sup>37</sup> The terms "exotopy," "exotopia," "extralocality," "outsideness"

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<sup>36</sup> For instance in Todorov, T. (1995) "Michail Bachtin. The Dialogical Principle", in Todorov, T. (ed.) *Theory and History of Literature*, Volume No. 13. Translated by W. Godzich. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>37</sup> For example Bakhtin's crucial passage "this is [*undecipherable*] the author's outside position in relation to the hero, the author's loving removal of himself from the field of the hero's life, his clearing of the whole field of life for the hero and his existence, and—the compassionate understanding and consummation of the event of the hero's life in terms of real cognition and ethical action by a detached, unparticipating beholder" (Bakhtin, 1990, pp. 14-15), from: Bakhtin, M. (1990) "Author and hero in aesthetic activity" in: *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*. Edited by M. Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, Slavic Series, No. 9, has been translated as: "Questa

all aim to capture the idea of an author's or speaker's stance that is not fully embedded in a localised or self-referential cultural framework; instead, the authorial stance implies a deliberate distancing that enables the subject to engage in a genuine dialogue with multiple, often conflicting voices, thus allowing for a richer, more nuanced construction of meaning. In Bakhtin's words: "The artist does not get involved in the event as a direct participant—in such a case, he would be a knowing subject, acting in the ethical sphere; instead, he occupies an essential position outside the event as disinterested viewer but with an understanding of the axiological meaning of what is happening; he does not experience it, but co-experiences it, since the event cannot be viewed as such unless, in some measure, we participate in it by evaluating it. This exotopy (which is not indifference) allows artistic activity to give the event unity, form, and completion from outside. Such a unification and such a completion are radically impossible from inside this knowledge and from inside this act." (Bakhtin in Todorov, 1995, p. 100). In documentary filmmaking, exotopy might translate into a specific spatial and metaphysical type of positioning of the author with respect to the real, as we will further explore in the chapter *Exotopic forms. Honouring the real*; through this positioning, authors become uniquely open to receive and capture not just the unexpected, but the unforeseen- events and testimonies that take shape outside their frame of reference.

For many documentarians, listening to the story of the oppressed, marginalised or invisible voices becomes almost a collateral activity as they make a film; however, a documentary author might film a witness who is not the victim, and whose story is not one to fend for. In *The Killer Inside me* (1995), an episode of the miniseries titled *Interrotron Stories*, documentary filmmaker Errol Morris interviews Sondra London, a woman who in her youth had dated serial killer G. J. Schaefer, and who later reconnected with him with the purpose of writing a biographical book about his life as a murderer. As per his usual style, Morris interviews London with a fixed camera in what seems to be a rather simple, ordinary way of framing a "talking head" type of scene. The editing proceeds through cuts that feel like jump cuts because of the similarity between shots- London is consistently filmed frontally through

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è [illeggibile] l'extralocalità dell'autore rispetto all'eroe, l'amorosa rimozione di sé dal campo della vita dell'eroe, lo sgombero di tutto il campo della vita a favore dell'eroe e della sua esistenza, la partecipe comprensione e il compimento dell'evento della vita dell'eroe, in qualità di spettatore impassibile in senso conoscitivo ed etico" (Bakhtin, 2000, p. 14) in Bakhtin, M. "L'autore e l'eroe nell'attività estetica", in: *L'autore e l'eroe*. Teoria letteraria e scienze umane, Torino: Einaudi.

similar frames that look like crops of a master shot. At carefully selected moments, usually when the interview reveals more unsettling information, the shots are intervalled with seconds of black video of varying lengths. A soundtrack that goes almost unnoticed creates some subtle auditory suspense. Morris' cinematography-related and editing choices are meticulous despite what appears to be a minimalistic visual approach. This creates a strange narrative tension as well as giving the idea that Morris is giving his full and almost obsessive attention to Sondra's each and every word, pause, face expression or eye movement. Morris clearly listens deeply and investigatively to Sondra as she recalls her relationship to Schaefer. Morris' questions are not included in the film. This, along with the frontal shots of Sondra, give the viewer the illusion of speaking with her directly, of receiving an unfiltered testimony of her intimate relationship with the killer. Sondra appears to be looking the viewer directly in the eye thanks to the deployment of an *interrotron*, a device invented by Morris to facilitate more intimate and engaging interviews, which he employed in numerous other films, including *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003) and *The Thin Blue Line* (1988).<sup>38</sup> The term "interrotron" combines "interview" and "terror", reflecting its aim to reduce the anxiety often experienced by interviewees. The device consists of two teleprompters connected to two cameras: one records the subject, while the other displays the interviewer's face on a monitor in front of the camera lens; this setup enables the subject to look directly into the interviewer's eyes via the beam splitter, creating the illusion of face-to-face conversation with the viewer, making them appear more relatable and favours a more intimate connection with the audience (Morris in Bloom, 2010). The device also allows newscasters to read pre-agreed text and look into the lens of the camera at the same time while presenting the news, and it was later deployed to prevent inexperienced talent from appearing visibly nervous on camera by allowing them to establish a direct but illusionary

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<sup>38</sup> Other notorious films in which Errol Morris employs his signature Interrotron to delve into controversial realities include *The Unknown Known* (2013), a documentary in which Morris uses the *interrotron* to conduct an in-depth interview with former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The device facilitates a direct and intimate conversation that probes Rumsfeld's reflections on his decision-making processes and the complexities inherent in political leadership and communication; and *American Dharma* (2018), where Morris again harnesses the power of the *interrotron*—this time to engage former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon in a wide-ranging dialogue about his political beliefs and strategies. The film provides valuable insight into Bannon's worldview and the underpinnings of his approach to politics.

connection with the interviewer's eyes. Morris was the first to use the *interrotron* in documentary filmmaking, raising new questions about the interaction between truth, perception, and representations of the real, given the interrotron's paradoxical effect as on one hand, it creates the illusion of closeness, while on the other, it reveals a constructed stage more than representing the intimacy of a conversation since the witness seems to be speaking directly to the audience which feels unnatural.<sup>39</sup> In *The Killer Inside me*, through the *interrotron*, Sondra tells Morris about her teenage love story with Schaefer. She was young and in love with an 'awfully nice guy', who 'came from a well-to-do family, joined the yacht club set, the debutante set, and went to catholic school' (Sondra London in *The Killer Inside me*, 1995); years later, Sondra learned about Schaefer's violent activity and double life and started reframing some of the behaviour she had observed through her unaware eyes; at the time, she is working as a business writer, and decides to write a book about her relationship to the killer; hence, she begins writing him letters while he is in jail (the book that results out of these exchanges is published with the title *Killer Fiction: Stories that Convicted the Ex-Cop of Murder* (1997). In Morris' film London explains: "I don't have any inner compulsion or fascination with the morbid; I knew a serial killer up close; I wanted to understand it. How is it possible to know someone so very well and for them to have a life of secret violence at the same time? How can someone be just as nice as they can be and you can see them and know them day in and day out, and then find out that all that time they were living a lie, something completely different, violence, sex, murder...". Sondra's desire to understand otherness somewhat mirrors that of Morris'. In *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003), Morris interviews with an *interrotron* Robert S. McNamara, who served as the American Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War, with the intention of exploring McNamara's questionable decisions in this role, and the lessons he learned from his experiences. Presenting McNamara's philosophy of war through eleven key points, In *The Fog of War*, Errol Morris presents McNamara's perspective through extensive interviews, allowing him to articulate his experiences and lessons learned. Morris employs a largely observational approach, refraining from overt commentary or direct challenges during the

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<sup>39</sup> In Morris' words: "For the first time, I could be talking to someone, and they could be talking to me and at the same time looking directly into the lens of the camera. Now, there was no looking off slightly to the side. No more faux first person. This was the true first person" (From an interview of Erroll Morris to himself, reported on his website, available at:

<https://www.errolmorris.com/content/eyecontact/interrotron.html>, last accessed: February 2025.

interviews. This method enables McNamara to convey his narrative without immediate confrontation. However, Morris subtly conveys his own perspective through the film's structure and supplementary materials. He incorporates archival footage, historical recordings, and a compelling score by Philip Glass to provide context and underscore the gravity of the events discussed. This juxtaposition allows viewers to critically assess McNamara's statements within a broader historical framework. While Morris does not explicitly confront McNamara, the film serves as a devastating portrait of self-deception, suggesting a nuanced critique of McNamara's actions and justifications. By presenting McNamara's perspective alongside carefully selected historical context, Morris invites viewers to engage in their own critical analysis, subtly indicating areas where his viewpoint may diverge from that of his subject. Not only do the editing choices and the soundtrack create a reflective atmosphere that prompts viewers to question and analyze McNamara's statements; Morris also conveys his perspective in the way he chooses to frame McNamara: against an abstract, uncanny background, slightly tilted with respect to the centre of the frame and the horizontal axis, suggestive of the fact that their planes of existence are incompatible. Through these aesthetic and technical choices, Morris not only presents information but also frames it in a way that reflects his interpretive stance, engaging viewers in a deeper exploration of the subject matter; Morris' ability to deeply listen enables him to balance both perspectives. As Morris puts it when he describes his approach to interviews: "I don't really believe in adversarial interviews. I don't think you learn very much. You create a theatre, a gladiatorial theatre, which may be satisfying to an audience, but if the goal is to learn something that you don't know, that's not the way to go about doing it. In fact, it's the way to destroy the possibility of ever hearing anything interesting or new. The most interesting and most revealing comments have come not as a result of a question at all, but having set up a situation where people actually want to talk to you, and want to reveal something to you.". (Morris in Thayer, 2019). Sondra London is able to establish a close, unsettling yet fascinating relationship to a serial killer; similarly, Morris can dialogue with McNamara as he describes his perspectives on modern warfare and expresses regret for his tragic mistakes. This aptitude towards others comes from an open-minded perspective, one that is not interested in condemning or condoning someone's flawed decisions as much as it chooses to engage in the understanding of the motives behind them; an approach that could be described as a listening position with respect to the complexity of the real.

As these examples show, an exotopic position of listening allows authors to enter a narrative realm in which their priority becomes to not only understand otherness, but also to both come through to opposing worldview and share them with audiences in a way that does not betray the author's point of view. The non-adversarial interviewing style of Morris, for instance, echoes some of the listening techniques that psychologists have investigated to communicate with opposing interlocutors. In developing an effective listening methodology, psychiatrist Mark Goulston draws from his extensive experience as a crisis psychiatrist, his work coaching business leaders, and his FBI hostage negotiation training to analyze the approaches that have enabled him to establish trust and engage in high-stakes conversations (Goulston, 2009). Central to his method is the idea that true listening is not simply about hearing words but about making the interlocutor *feel felt*—a profound emotional recognition that allows individuals, even those who are defensive, distraught, or hostile, to lower their barriers and engage in meaningful dialogue. Goulston argues that people, particularly those in distress, do not necessarily need solutions or immediate answers; rather, they need to feel deeply understood and validated in their experiences before they can open up to communication. To facilitate this shift, Goulston introduces what he calls *surgical empathy*—a deliberate, precise form of listening that helps break through psychological defenses by identifying and addressing deep emotional pain (Goulston, 2009, pp. 132-137). This approach involves asking the right questions, mirroring emotions, and responding in ways that create emotional safety, ultimately helping individuals move from reactive hostility to a state of cognitive and emotional receptiveness. His techniques, such as the *Magic Paradox*, where a listener verbalizes the resistant thoughts of their counterpart to disarm defensiveness, or *The Impossibility Question*, which prompts individuals to consider what they think cannot be changed, are designed to guide people from resistance to trust and engagement. Beyond providing practical techniques for improving listening skills, *Just Listen* reinforces the broader principle that an accepting, curious, and non-aggressive approach to communication is particularly effective with difficult interlocutors. By fostering trust and psychological comfort, this approach not only grants deeper access to another person's perspective but also facilitates smoother negotiations, de-escalates conflict, and ultimately transforms adversarial interactions into cooperative exchanges. In this way, Goulston's work highlights how active and empathic listening is not just a communication tool, but a powerful mechanism for creating meaningful human connections, resolving conflict, and even diffusing dangerous

situations.<sup>40</sup> To see some of Goulston's principles at play, consider for instance BAFTA-nominated BBC producer Sam McAlister's reflections on listening as a crucial skill for successful negotiation and interviewing methods (McAlister, 2022). Renowned for securing high-profile interviews with reluctant individuals, McAlister orchestrated the notorious 2019 BBC interview with Prince Andrew, conducted by Emily Maitlis, in which the prince addressed his association with Jeffrey Epstein and responded to allegations regarding his alleged sexual misconduct; by listening attentively during negotiations, which allowed her to understanding the concerns of the royal public relations' team, and building a foundation of trust and rapport, she persuaded the prince to the interview; then, as the interview was taking place, Maitlis's adept listening skills emerged through her capacity to notice inconsistencies and strategically follow up with probing questions which exposed significant weaknesses in her interviewee's narratives.<sup>41</sup> The interview's impact was substantial, revealing the prince's lack of empathy and awareness, which led to a significant public backlash and his eventual withdrawal from public duties (McAlister, 2022). As it showed how a seemingly passive approach based on listening can be as effective as a more aggressive attitude and pressing, process-like questioning, the case illustrated the pivotal role of listening skills in unmasking the truth and holding powerful individuals accountable (Fisher, 2021).

As these considerations suggest, listening can be a transformative, multifaceted process that involves mirroring, invention and presence, not the merely passive act of hearing words. At its core, effective listening functions as a form of mirroring—when a listener reflects back what is shared, the speaker feels genuinely heard. This mirroring validates the speaker, fostering an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance that can dissolve communication barriers, and encourage felt and authentic testimonies. Yet, listening also involves a creative act: as we absorb someone else's narrative, our minds naturally weave a story around their words. This imaginative fabrication—shaped by our emotions, cultural backgrounds, and personal experiences—is never a direct reproduction of the speaker's intent; instead, it is a

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<sup>40</sup> Goulston however draws some boundaries to the effectiveness of his techniques; psychopaths and people affected by narcissistic personality disorder for instance are considered unworkable even with the best listening techniques when it comes to negotiation or even day-to-day communication.

<sup>41</sup> For example, when Prince Andrew claimed he could not recall meeting Virginia Giuffre, Maitlis's precise follow-up questions, based on careful listening, highlighted the implausibility of his statements, leading to further damage to his credibility (Allington, 2020).

provisional narrative that invites us to question our assumptions. Since storytelling is an intrinsic part of human existence, we rely on these narratives to make sense of our lives, even if and when they remain only partially true. At its highest level, listening demands a component of distance, or disidentification: instead of clinging to the story one has constructed about the other, they can step back and immerse in the immediacy of the shared present. Developing an “outsidedness” from one’s own narratives requires maturing a certain detachment from one’s own opinions on the real; a positioning that is reminiscent of the Socratic view which posits that our perceptions of good and evil arise from our own desires and illusions rather than from objective truth, unless we operate at high levels of rationality and detachment. Developing this kind of detachment can be described as a journey towards silencing the stream of thoughts and emotional reactions that the mind produces in relation to the real. This concept finds a compelling practical expression in documentary filmmaking. For instance, Wim Wenders speaks of an “eternal present” from which a film can emerge, one where the director is immersed in the unfolding dialogue of reality without the constraints of predetermined narratives (Wenders, 2022, p. 85, author’s translation). Listening—whether as mirroring, as the imaginative invention of a narrative, or as the disidentification from our own biases—is a dynamic and embodied process. It is not about waiting for the other to fulfill our expectations, but about actively creating a space where the exchange of voices allows both speaker and listener to grow and transform.

As such, listening skills serve documentary filmmakers in many more endeavours other than interviews; they enable documentary authors to gain insight of different perspectives on reality, allowing them to coexist in documentary as well as nonfictional narratives. Consider for instance the ways in which Roberto Rossellini’s timeless masterpiece *Roma Città Aperta* (1945) could be described through the lens of exotopy. The film’s narrative unfolds as a polyphony of diverse voices—resistance fighters, ordinary citizens, a conflicted priest, and even the oppressors—each contributing to an open, layered depiction of life under Nazi occupation. This approach echoes Bakhtin’s dialogic principle, where meaning emerges from the interplay of multiple, often contradictory, perspectives. By refusing to privilege a single “center” of authority, Rossellini positions the film in what could be again described as an exotopic space of research, one that is open to the discovery of otherness and resists a monolithic narrative based on what is already known. As Rossellini explained of his approach to cinema: “An image can be used for entertainment, for spectacle (...), but it can also provide

information, knowledge. (...) My means are poor; I fully make use of one privilege—the privilege of being ignorant. To be ignorant and driven by the thirst to understand rather than merely to learn.” (Rossellini in Aprà, 1987, p. 20, author’s translation).<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Rossellini’s use of on-location shooting in the war-torn streets of Rome and his employment of non-professional actors lend the film an immediacy and authenticity that disrupt conventional cinematic centers. This aesthetic “outsideness” and spatial detachment—recording real life on its own terms rather than staging it in controlled studio environments—creates an open, “extralocal” field of vision. The film thereby becomes a space where the audience is invited to listen actively to the ambient sounds and unscripted exchanges of everyday life, an experience that mirrors the Bakhtinian idea of “exotopy” as a form of listening that transcends traditional narrative confines. In addition to this, the film’s documentary-like style and naturalistic dialogue compel the viewer to engage in an act of listening that goes beyond passive reception. By capturing the raw, unpolished voices of its subjects and the layered soundscape of a city in crisis, *Roma Città Aperta* creates a reflective space where listening becomes a means of uncovering deeper truths hidden beneath the surface of spoken words and actions—aligning with the concept of exotopic listening (see the chapter *Exotopic forms*) where one’s attention is directed outward, towards the multitude of lived experiences, rather than inward to pre-established frameworks; and finally, An exotopic stance implies not only openness to the external but also a conscious effort to disidentify from one’s own narrative biases. Rossellini’s film, with its unsentimental, sometimes stark portrayal of occupation and resistance, challenges viewers to question conventional representations of heroism and villainy. In doing so, it encourages an active process of reinterpretation and self-reflection—a mode of “listening” in which the viewer, positioned as an outsider to the constructed myth, can engage critically with the historical and ethical complexities presented on screen. This is even more striking when the film’s exotopy is analysed considering it was released in 1945, when the individual and collective traumas caused by the atrocities of the war were more than vivid in the spectators’ eyes. About filming *Roma Città Aperta*, Rossellini wrote: “The only valid purpose of cinema—the only one that, to me, is worthy of a true director—is inquiry. (...) I wasn’t interested in

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<sup>42</sup> Rossellini said: “L’immagine può essere utilizzata ai fini di divertimento, di spettacolo (...), ma può anche fornire un’ informazione, una conoscenza. (...) I miei mezzi sono poveri, utilizzo fino in fondo un privilegio, quello di essere ignorante. Essere ignorante e animato dalla sete di comprendere non di apprendere.” (Rossellini in Aprà, 1987, p. 20).

constructing a romanticized narrative according to the rules of cinematic dramaturgy, because the facts themselves were far more dramatic than any conventional spectacle”; and about the contact between the victors and the vanquished in *Paisà* (1950), “from their encounter arose such confusion that, in the end, there were neither winners or losers. All that remained was the everyday heroism of the man clinging to life.” (Rossellini in Aprà, 1987, p. 191, author’s translation).<sup>43</sup> In these ways, *Roma Città Aperta* embodies an exotopic position by both situating itself outside the sanitised centers of traditional war cinema and by inviting a deep engagement—a listening and re-listening—that opens up space for multiple truths and challenges the viewer to rethink conventional narratives of power, resistance, and humanity, tendencies that permeate many Italian neorealist films of the time; as Bertozzi wrote of neorealist cinema “A documentarian emergency unites all Italian cinema of the period—a way of seeing that is not merely a matter of vision, but one that simultaneously infuses both ethics and aesthetics. (...) The gaze shifts from a singular hero to an ensemble narrative, uncovering realms of truth and street non-actors, hidden professions and regional languages, local tragedies and national dramas, at a decisive moment for the collective reclamation of the national identity.” (Bertozzi, 2008, p. 102, author’s translation).<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, consider the masterpiece *Chronicle of a Summer* (Original title: *Chronique d'un été*, 1960) by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in its dialogical, exotopic, and polyphonic aspects, particularly in the way it self-reflexively engages with its subjects and their perspectives. The final sequence, where the film's participants watch and discuss the footage of themselves, exemplifies these qualities. The act of showing the film to its own witnesses creates a dialogical space in which the subjects’ voices and interpretations confront those of the filmmakers, allowing for a multi-layered examination of the filmed reality. In this sequence the filmmakers’ position themselves both outside and beside the subjects’ lives

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<sup>43</sup> Rossellini said: “il solo scopo valido del cinema, il solo che per me è degno di un vero regista, è la ricerca.(...) Non mi interessava costruire un racconto romanzato, secondo le regole della drammaturgia cinematografica perché i fatti erano di per sé molto più drammatici di qualsivoglia convenzione spettacolare.(...) Dal contatto tra vincitori e vinti nasceva una gran confusione, tanto che alla fine non c'erano più nè vincitori nè vinti. Restava solo l'eroismo quotidiano dell'uomo che si aggrappa alla vita.” (Rossellini in Aprà, 1987, p. 191).

<sup>44</sup> Bertozzi wrote: “L'emergenza documentaria accomuna tutto il cinema italiano del periodo: uno sguardo che non è solo una questione di occhi, ma che pervade, congiuntamente, l'etica e l'estetica. (...) Lo sguardo si sposta dall'eroe singolo alla vicenda corale e scopre ambienti del vero e attori di strada, professioni nascoste e lingue regionali tragedie locali e drammi nazionali in un momento decisivo per la riappropriazione collettiva del sé.” (Bertozzi, 2008, p. 102).

enabling them to present an externalised view of their experiences that is also both an affectionate “walk beside them”, and the opening of a space for the subjects’ critique and reconfiguration of their representations, which rejects a singular dominating perspective. The final discussion highlights the subjective, constructed nature of documentary truth, as participants react with approval, discomfort, or disagreement, underscoring the complexity of representing lived experience. This reflexive approach makes *Chronicle of a Summer* not just a record of reality, but an exploration of the processes and ethics of representation, a dialogue in and about itself.

Accessing and representing different points of view is crucial in documentary image-making as much as in anthropological fieldwork and any other field where narrative inquiry plays a role. Anthropologist and sociologist Marianella Scavi sums up her conclusions on the value of listening skills in *Arte di ascoltare e mondi possibili. Come si esce dalle cornici di cui siamo parte* (2012) with an anecdote about the wise judge and the two litigants. According to the story, the judge, after carefully listening to the opposing points of view of the contendants, concluded: “You are both right”; as he was confronted by a witness in the audience who objected that the two opponents could not both be right at the same time, the judge simply replicated “You are also right”; even though the judge validates all perspectives, he does not declare them as equally legally, socially or morally acceptable (Scavi, 2012, p. 9); a plausible imaginary ending to the story involves the judge returning to his role after having explored the perspectives of the contenders and issuing his verdict; the story, however, omits the ending, which seems to suggest that dialogues are often oriented towards a result, while little attention is paid to listening to different perspectives and exploring their realities; the purpose of the story in Scavi’s reflection is to highlight how diverse points of view can coexist in the same spatio-temporal field, and the ways in which listening techniques can grant access to these alternative dimensions of reality, enriching the listener. As far as anthropological field research, these reflections are a particularly useful starting point to rehabilitate the importance of emotions and other subjective elements in field research (see for instance the work of Pennacini, 2010, in particular Pussetti’s contribution (Pussetti, 2010), and Beatty, 2019). Like in Bakhtin’s reflections about storytelling, to study these subjective elements the researcher has to put themselves in a position of outsideness with respect to reality, one from which to listen as well as being receptive to unforeseen meanings that might emerge from diverse frames of reference. In resonance with Bakhtin’s ideas about the threefold significance of

content/text, the tone of voice that reads the text/embodies the content, and the context in which the voice speaks to co-create meaning in communication, Scalvi observes how emotions can act as traces for the researcher to retrieve the imagined context of the speaker, which might or might not coincide with that of the listener (Sclavi, 2012, p. 97-100).<sup>45</sup> As some anthropologists have pointed out, collecting Malinowski's "imponderabilia" of research is not enough to understand them; the field researcher must also determine a frame of meaning within a given cultural and historical context; hence, a narrative approach to field research that makes it possible to study emotions not as a collection of single psycho-corporal or socio-cultural events, but as episodes registered within a social and cultural system which influences and is influenced by the emotional responses of his subjects and by those of the researcher, might prove fruitful (Pussetti, 2010; Beatty, 2019). In the context of narrative approaches to field research, art-based research methods (or ABR) have allowed researchers from various fields including sociology, anthropology and cultural studies to use their own artistic skills to capture and study the intersubjective and multidimensional elements of fieldwork (Given, 2008; Barone and Eisner, 2012). Within art-based research methods, documentary filmmaking emerges as a valuable practice for investigating these elements through visual and narrative inquiry, as demonstrated by the work of academic-filmmakers such as Steven Eastwood, Emma Davies, Adele Tulli, and Therese Hannigsen who produced films as research within the academic context. See for instance *Island* (2017) by Steven Eastwood (London Queen Mary University), *Becoming Animal* (2018) by Emma Davie (University of Edinburgh), and *All These Summers* (2025) by Therese Hannigsen (Royal Holloway University of London). We explore the application of this method in the chapter *Notes from the field. Beyond participation: towards a listening positioning*.

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<sup>45</sup> Emotions have long occupied an ambiguous space within the social and cultural sciences. Early figures in sociology, for example, Émile Durkheim (1895) made a clear distinction between the socially determined, objective aspects of life and the psychic, subjective elements that are more difficult to quantify. In a similar way, Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) recognized the central importance of emotions in everyday life—but he subsumed them under the category of "imponderabilia," those subtle and elusive elements that resist simple measurement. In the 1970s, scholars within the constructivist tradition argued that emotions are not simply natural, fixed responses but are instead socio-cultural artifacts, shaped by historical and cultural forces; however, since the beginning of the new century a different perspective has emerged; this newer view contends that emotions are also the result of individual choice; rather than being mere victims of cultural conditioning or biological determinism, individuals—through their exercise of free will—can actively modify their emotional responses and, by doing so, reshape their social identities; (Pussetti, 2010); in this paradigm emotions become a key of access to the analysis of social identities and structures (Sclavi, 2012);

As a form of a visual and narrative inquiry method to explore the real, documentary filmmaking emerges as a practice that focuses more on exploring and less on making decisions; in this respect, a listening methodology in documentary filmmaking aligns with Scalvi's seven rules to master the art of listening in anthropological and sociological field research; in turn, Scalvi's rules describe the intellectual and emotional premises of the exotopic position of listening that we introduced earlier in this section. Given our reflections, these rules apply to the discovery of otherness as much as to the discovery of the self; as Jean-Jacques Rousseau eloquently wrote: "I would have loved men in spite of themselves; they could only escape my love by ceasing to be men. They are therefore strangers to me, unknown, null and void, and this is because they wanted it. But I, separated from them and from everything, what am I? I still have to look for this." Rousseau, 2021, p. 197, author's translation). Scalvi's rules are: (1) don't be in a hurry to reach conclusions. Conclusions are the most ephemeral part of the research; (2) what you see depends on your point of view; (3) if you want to understand what another person is saying you have to assume that they are right and ask them to help you see things and events from their perspective; (4) emotions are essential cognitive tools, if you know how to understand their language. They don't tell you what you see but how you look. Their code is relational and analogical; (5) a good listener is an explorer of possible worlds. The most important signals for him are those that present themselves to the conscience as negligible and annoying at the same time, marginal and irritating, because they are inconsistent with one's own certainties; (6) a good listener welcomes the paradoxes of thought and communication, addressing disagreements as opportunities to practise in a field that fascinates them: the creative management of conflicts; (7) to become an expert in the art of listening you must adopt a humorous methodology;

when you have learned to listen, humour emerges spontaneously (Sclavi, 2012, p. 115, author's translation).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Scalvi wrote: “1. Non avere fretta di arrivare a delle conclusioni. Le conclusioni sono la parte più effimera della ricerca; 2. Quel che vedi dipende dal tuo punto di vista. Per riuscire a vedere il tuo punto di vista devi cambiare punto di vista; 3. Se vuoi comprendere quello che un altro sta dicendo devi assumere che ha ragione e chiedergli di aiutarti a vedere le cose e gli eventi dalla sua prospettiva; 4. Le emozioni sono degli strumenti conoscitivi fondamentali, se sai comprendere il loro linguaggio. Non ti informano su cosa vedi ma su come guardi. Il loro codice è relazionale e analogico; 5. Un buon ascoltatore è un esploratore di mondi possibili. I segnali più importanti per lui sono quelli che si presentano alla coscienza come al tempo stesso trascurabili e fastidiosi, marginali e irritanti, perché incongruenti con le proprie certezze; 6. Un buon ascoltatore accoglie volentieri i paradossi del pensiero e della comunicazione. Affronta i dissensi come occasioni per esercitarsi in un campo che lo appassiona: la gestione creativa dei conflitti; 7. Per divenire un esperto dell'arte di ascoltare devi adottare una metodologia umoristica. Ma quando hai imparato ad ascoltare, l'umorismo viene da sé.” (Sclavi, 2012, p. 115).

**Notes from the field.**

**Towards a listening positioning**

## 6. Listening gaze. Reflexive observations on the film *Aylesbury Estate* (2020)

### Introduction

This section explores the idea of a listening approach to documentary filmmaking through revisiting the making of my feature-length documentary film *Aylesbury Estate* (2020), which shows some stories from the well-known social housing estate in London, which I called home for a few years. Shot between 2017 and 2020, the film follows the existential journey of a group of residents who must face the long demolition process of their estate. Through the analysis of the process of making the film and the film's final form, the article proposes a 'listening gaze' for conducting field research through documentary film practice.

### The housing project

The Aylesbury Estate, one of the largest brutalist public housing complexes in the world, is located in the Southwark district of London.<sup>47</sup> The Aylesbury is also a place where I lived from 2012 to 2015, just before the start of the demolition process that is still ongoing at the time of writing this article. Upon deciding to direct a documentary film about the Estate, I returned to the Aylesbury from 2017 to 2020. The project of the film was driven by two main motivations. On one hand, I felt the urgency to highlight some of the effects of the demolition process on residents that seem to be absent from official narratives. As Lees highlighted, during the negotiations leading to the evictions, which were necessary to bring the demolition of the Aylesbury to completion, the residents of the Aylesbury Estate faced manipulation and coercion by representatives of the Southwark Council, which led them into a deadlock in the discussions, leaving them with the "false choice" of either continuing to live in an Estate that was in a state of semi-abandonment due to the suspension of maintenance work or accepting the "regeneration" of the complex (Lees, 2014). On the other hand, there emerged a need to explore some of the existential tensions common to many residents of contemporary cities,

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<sup>47</sup> London is divided into districts, also called boroughs, each administered by the respective local council; *Southwark* is a borough located in the southeastern quadrant of the city and is under the administration of the Council of Southwark.

who strive to resist a growing process of social and personal disconnection. Filming at the Aylesbury Estate also presented complexities, which can be summarised in three central questions: how can the filmmakers return the images of a place to its inhabitants, stripping them of their strong political narratives? Where should they position the camera within the dense cognitive space that both divides and connects the researcher-filmmaker and reality? Finally, how can they portray the lives of others without crossing invisible yet tangible ethical boundaries, while at the same time not omitting to narrate the full experience of the other? These questions gave rise to a visual research journey that culminated in the film *Aylesbury Estate* (2020).<sup>48</sup> By retracing the process of making the film and examining some sequences of the finished work through the lens of the aforementioned questions, this contribution proposes a ‘listening gaze’ as a means of conducting field research through cinema.



Figure 1, Judy on the doorstep of her flat, from the film *Aylesbury Estate* (2020)

### **Filming the Aylesbury Estate: side notes on gathering the footage**

The Aylesbury Estate's fame across the United Kingdom and beyond owes much to the proliferation of images depicting it after its construction.<sup>49</sup> Due to its significant presence in

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<sup>48</sup> The film was presented in the national competition at the 61° *Festival dei Popoli* in 2020 and at the 2021 *London International Documentary Festival* (LIDF21).

<sup>49</sup> As shown by the BBC and Pathé archives, even years after its construction, the Aylesbury Estate remains at the center of British political metaphors. On June 2, 1997, the new Prime Minister Tony Blair chose the Aylesbury as the location for his first official speech, in which, directly addressing the

the national imagination that has been built over the years (some of the key steps of this journey are summarised below), representing the Aylesbury meant risking the possibility that the gaze, accustomed to seeking what it already knows, might fall back on its own automatisms. It became necessary to search for the most significant images of the complex and use visual research to create a dialogue between past and present.

The first images of the Estate that I found were clips from the promotional documentary film *17,000,000 New Homes by 1999* (1966), produced by the Laing Foundation, a British construction firm. In the film, which is visually striking due to its aesthetically pleasing footage and flawless editing, the voiceover emphasises the efficiency of the 12M Jespersen system, which significantly reduced overall building times and costs for various British estates through the mass production of prefabricated parts, such as the characteristic raw concrete panels, followed by on-site assembly (Figure 2). The Aylesbury was built by Laing between 1967 and 1977, based on designs by architect Hans Peter Trenton, backed by a team of young architects. Two of them, John Crallan and John Nichols, appear in three sequences in the film. In the first sequence in chronological order, Crallan and Nichols, now elderly and retired, meet at the Aylesbury with some Aylesbury residents of the complex, who welcome them in their homes.<sup>50</sup> Once inside, the two architects seem eager to inspect the rooms, which they appear to be seeing for the first time. It has been in fact over forty years since they physically inspected the premises of the site, and they appear rather shocked at how it turned out to be. As they explain to the residents, overseeing the construction of the Aylesbury in the 1960s was their first prestigious and demanding assignment as young professionals, and they view the project of the Aylesbury as a way to improve the housing conditions of the British working class, who were forced to live in dilapidated shacks or tin prefabs after the Second World War bombings, which had destroyed entire neighbourhoods in the south-east area of London.

Accompanied by lively music and through some breath-taking footage, the Laing documentary also shows the demolition of the old Victorian houses that once stood where the Aylesbury was going to be built. As shown in these fascinating images, the demolition

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“forgotten people of Britain”, he promised them that there would be no more “hopeless areas” in the new Labour nation. In May 2010, just days into his first term as Prime Minister, David Cameron visited the Estate to remind voters of his intention to begin demolishing “sunk estates” like the Aylesbury.

<sup>50</sup> Part of the sequence uses material filmed in 2014 by anthropologist Caterina Sartori; see Sartori, C. (2016) “The precarious confines of homeownership and rights”. In *Mediapolis, a journal of cities and cultures*, 5(6).

workers would use a simple ladder to reach the top roof of the houses and they would start the dismantling process from there by hand, with hammer and chisel. As Crallan explains to the residents, the lengthy demolition processes of the 1960s subjected the inhabitants to considerable levels of psycho-emotional stress, causing them to walk around dizzy and disoriented, like alcoholics, in environments that were once familiar to them but were now taking on a completely different appearance. Later in the film, one of the young architects that works on the designing of the new housing project that will replace the Aylesbury, which is called the Elephant Park, talks about the new architectural vision for the neighbourhood, and how much it differs from the old project of the Estate. It comes forth that both generations of architects have envisioned a reconstruction phase that starts from an architectural and social *tabula rasa*. Neither of the two projects take into serious consideration ways to integrate the old buildings into the new designs. In light of the architects' testimonies, the Laing demolition images, when watched today, take on a different meaning. The construction of the Aylesbury appears to be part of a broader history of destruction and reconstruction rooted in the mechanisms of capitalism.

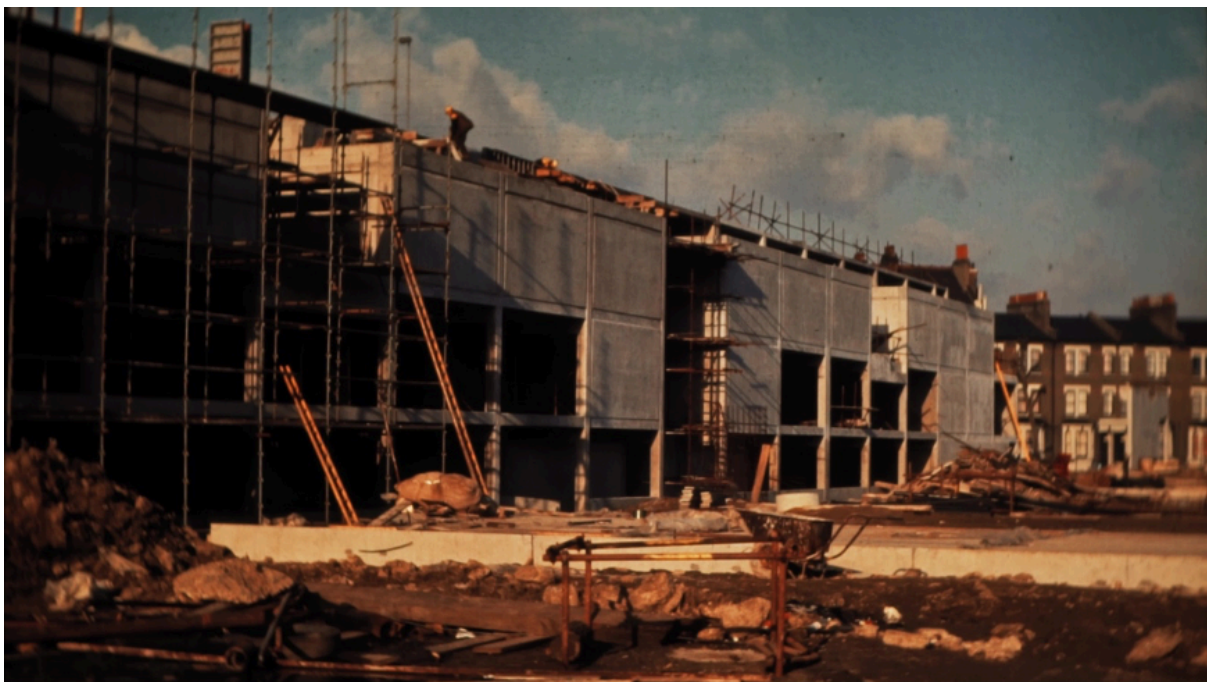


Figure 2, The building of the Aylesbury through the Jaspersion system, from the film *Aylesbury Estate* (2020)

London needed a working class, and this cohort had to enjoy a certain level of well-being to sustain consumption and restart the national economy; it was therefore a form of

gentrification *avant la lettre*, which only fortuitously benefited the workers, and probably not the most disadvantaged amongst them.

In the second sequence of the film with the architects of the Estate, Nichols shows Crallan a series of photographic slides he took of the Aylesbury between the 1960s and 1970s. In the images, the Aylesbury appears as a modern and cutting-edge housing complex (Figure 3). Like other Estates of that era, the Aylesbury was designed with a forward-thinking vision of a sustainable and human-centred city of the future. Thanks to the Parker Morris standard, the design of the Estate featured exceptionally spacious homes for the time, as well as the construction of external skywalks—suspended walkways that created long panoramic pedestrian routes through the various housing blocks. In the next scene, Frederick, an elderly former demolition worker, who used to dismantle Victorian houses and who is now facing an imminent eviction order from the Southwark Council to leave his home at the Aylesbury where he has lived since 1968, recalls that living in the complex was once regarded as a luxury. Despite this promising beginning, a diametrically opposed visual narrative of the complex later emerged. From the new century onwards, the Aylesbury was frequently depicted through images of empty architectures, framed to highlight the verticality of the blocks, the standardisation of the design of the flats inside and out, and the despair of empty, narrow, dark and seemingly unsafe elevated pedestrian walkways.



Figure 3a, The photo slides of Crallan and Nichols, from the film *Aylesbury Estate* (2020)



Figure 3b, The photo slides of Crallan and Nichols, from the film *Aylesbury Estate* (2020)

These images did not fail to encourage an association between large housing estates like the Aylesbury and desolation. In reality, as shown in some sequences of the film *Aylesbury Estate*, even after the demolitions began, the complex was home to a strong and cohesive community of residents that continued to assert their right to defend their common spaces. The most representative images of this phase are perhaps the few seconds of the Channel Four *ident*, a short video clip aired by the British channel from 2004 to 2015. The brief tracking shot includes images where the architectural elements of the Aylesbury are easily identifiable; in the images some garbage, laundry hanging from windows, and a shopping trolley can be seen. In the shot, these elements move around and shape the symbol “4” in the style of the Channel. Naturally, the video was staged using props placed specifically to align with the camera's predetermined path. As urbanist Ben Campkin noted, the Aylesbury was not in such a state of decay at the time, but there was a political need to create visual evidence to support those who labelled it a 'ghost town' in order to encourage its demolition and make space for new, more profitable projects (Campkin, 2013, p. 102).

In retrospect, the Channel Four's *ident* seemed to reflect the allure of a new trend, that of urban desolation as a glamorous feature of an 'endangered' architecture, inhabited by urban misfits which capture the eyes of the spectator due to their marginalisation. However, over the years, and partly thanks to a new wave of images of the complex, it has become clear that

the demolition process of the estates was anything but glamorous.<sup>51</sup> The visual investigations into the Aylesbury in more recent years have sought to show the residents' struggle and the more brutal aspects of gentrification, such as the significant economic damage suffered by residents, the disintegration of communities, the displacement of specific social classes from central city areas, and the destruction of a particular way of relating to the world that was meant to be vehicled through the design of the housing estates. As Baxter argued, the architectural configuration of the Aylesbury had created a series of “practices of verticality”, such as the habit of looking down from above or walking along elevated pathways, which came to define relationships, memories, and customs, becoming inseparably tied to all the elements that make the Aylesbury a home for its residents (Baxter, 2017).

These reflections, which attempt to reinterpret verticality as a constitutive element of both collective and individual identities within broader considerations on place-identity, have influenced the way we see housing complexes, and in turn, images have explored these theoretical horizons. In the film *Aylesbury Estate*, sequences emerge that explore this connection, seeking to highlight how the individual and collective identities within the Aylesbury coexist with identities largely constructed from the outside. Aysen, a Turkish woman who has lived in the complex since 1997, describes the Aylesbury as the only place where she has not felt like a misfit/outsider but rather an important part of a diverse and harmonious community. Frederick, who has lived in the Aylesbury Estate for over fifty years, recounts how he felt lost when he was forced to move into a different area of the capital. In a later sequence of the film, the camera follows Frederick through his daily routes around the Aylesbury to show how the architectural morphology of the Estate is intertwined with the habits as geographical and human paths of the elderly former demolition worker (Figure 4). In some cases, these internal perspectives from within the complex differ completely from external viewpoints on the Estate. In the second part of the film, the architect working on the housing complex that will replace the Aylesbury explains that the new project aims to create an architectural break with the past to distance itself from the negative connotations that Brutalist concrete buildings have acquired due to crime and social tensions. The new team of architects and developers decided to demolish the most imposing blocks of the complex first precisely to demonstrate to the residents that the transformation process they are part of is

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<sup>51</sup> Among the most recent, the documentary *Dispossession* (2017) by Paul Sng, on the gentrification of several British estates, including the Aylesbury; *We Are Still Here* (2020) by Melissa Herman, on the battles of the Aylesbury residents; and the immersive VR project *Common Ground* (2021) by Darren Emerson, which reconstructs the geography of the complex before the demolitions.

“finally taking place.”. In other words, they were convinced that (1) the local resident felt like they were part of an exciting transformation process; (2) that they could not wait to see the Estate being replaced with a new housing complex; and (3) that they felt that the new project was infinitely better, from both an aesthetic and functional points of view, than the old one.

### **In search of an ethics of aesthetics in the documentary image**

As discussed in the section *Multidimensionality. Reflexive layers of truth*, every image carries at least two dimensions: the transitive dimension, as it shows something that existed at the moment of representation, and the reflexive one, which is the dimension at which the image presents itself, revealing the author's perspective on reality (Marin, 2014, p. 113). When it comes to documentary images, as previously discussed, more dimensions can be identified: the performative aspect, since the mere presence of the recording device can trigger events that would not happen without it; the intransitive, as the image conveys meanings that go beyond the author's intentions; and the ethical perspective, which, while relevant to any representation, is particularly significant for the documentary image. Since the invention of photography, the representation of reality has continually clashed with the ethical risks inherent in showing difficult aspects of human experience. In the chapter titled *In the world, not about it. Dialogical aspects of documentary*, some of the challenges that come with documenting the end of life have been discussed by looking at the documentary films *Nick's Movie. Lightenings over the Water* (1984) by Wim Wenders, about the final moments of Nicholas Ray's life, and *Island* (2017) by Steven Eastwood, especially the long take in which the British director follows a terminally ill patient towards the end of life. Documentary images stand on a difficult edge. On the one hand, it is necessary to expose the contradictions of the world; yet, there is a fine line between testimony and spectacle, compassion and voyeurism, memorialisation and humiliation of memory.

At the Aylesbury Estate, where forced demolitions threaten to dismantle the identity of a community, there are also testimonies of suffering. However, not all visual stories from the Estate highlight the most difficult experiences of the residents, perhaps as a response to the rhetoric of “gentrification porn”, a term used by some academics to refer to the voyeuristic and opportunistic gaze of filmmakers, visual artists, and some scholars of urban studies and related disciplines towards the intimate experiences of Aylesbury residents (Lees, 2021, p. 596). In deciding how to film what I observed at the estate, these considerations were of utmost importance. Choosing to exclude the most difficult testimonies from the story of a place that was evidently deeply marked by painful experiences seemed like a not entirely

transparent approach. At the same time, the footage I had gathered raised a series of questions: how, why, and to what extent should the film show the difficult aspects of the experience of residents? How should it balance conflicting ethical needs, such as the author's need to respect their intentions, the witnesses' acceptance of how their lives were portrayed in a documentary film, and the audience's need to be presented with necessary, respectful, and transparent representations? How can it bring ethical considerations and aesthetic choices into dialogue, or translate the former into the latter, while maintaining a coherent form that did justice to the diverse perspectives of the witnesses involved in the transformation of the Aylesbury area?



Figure 4, Frederick and his dogs, from the film *Aylesbury Estate* (2020)

### **Filming at the Aylesbury Estate; from observational documentary to a listening approach**

The making of *Aylesbury Estate*, my first feature film, marks the beginning of a journey in visual research that, until now, has progressively questioned the notion of observational gaze and its corresponding filming practices, where the observer-filmmaker “chooses to appear invisible or external to the events” (Nichols, 2014, p. 214, author’s translation). The mode of the external observer trying to conceal the author’s presence is ineffective from the start, because the author’s presence is evident from the first act of framing. Framing inherently means excluding. It follows that the observational mode cannot result in the objective

recording of reality; we have explored how the image, even if documentarian, is not an automatic proof of an event but rather its complex and multidimensional elaboration through important mediations, such as the gaze and the apparatus earlier in this work. Since the image simultaneously shows reality and the act of seeing it, in order to be understood in its various dimensions, it requires a deeper exploration beyond its surface, which may call for the conscious development and study of new visual languages and forms. In the context of documentary images, there is an additional complication due to the sometimes subtle distinction between observational style and observational intention. The term “observational style” typically refers to a visual style that mimics human observation, can favour long takes and handheld cameras, in order to craft the illusion that the film shows events “as they happen”, or as if nothing had been discarded by the author.<sup>52</sup> However, the observational style is just a set of technical and creative choices that can encourage the spectator to forget that they are led into the illusion by the mastermind-author behind it.<sup>53</sup> In reality, the multifaceted nature of representation makes it much more complex to draw conclusions on the relationship between what is real and what is imagined or created. To explore this, consider how the observational style can be used to depict reality or to represent scripted sequences. Similarly, “strictly” documentary images (if they exist) can present reality through a style that is not observational. Thus, an observational style can have little to do with the desire to document reality. The expression “observational intention” on the other hand refers to the author's true intent to show real events. But if the image is mediated by the author's subjective, partial, and situated gaze, the observational intention can reveal what was experienced, what was seen by a subjective entity, and not simply show what happened.

To explore these questions and reflect on the researcher-author's observational intention, I turned once again to the concept of *exotopic gaze*; as previously discussed in this contribution, to theorise exotopy, the philosopher and literary critic draws from Dostoevsky's novels, in which he identifies the curious absence of a singular consciousness (Bakhtin, 1984; see the sections *Dialogues of images, images as dialogues* and *Exotopy* in the chapter titled *In the world, not about it. Dialogical aspects of documentary*). For Bakhtin, the author of the

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<sup>52</sup> Clearly, this is not the case; for example, watching *At Berkeley* (2013) by Frederick Wiseman, one might get the impression of having seen everything worth seeing about the prestigious California university. However, the four hours and four minutes of the film condense hours and hours of footage, which are themselves the result of Wiseman's choice concerning what he observed during his months at Berkeley.

<sup>53</sup> Just think of the use of observational style in fiction films, and documentaries that choose different styles instead.

polyphonic novel seeks a particular cognitive position relative to the heroes of the story, which Sclavi has framed as a “listening position” (Sclavi, 2012). From this specific perspective, the author tries to distinguish their own consciousness from that of the heroes, allowing the latter to develop outside of the author’s consciousness. Exotopy, for Bakhtin, refers to the author’s willingness to try to contemplate the alterity of the heroes from a singular intellectual and emotional position of “distant closeness”. From this position, the author uses storytelling to explore the dialogical tensions between their subjectivity and that of the heroes. Through this exploration, the author becomes aware that their intellectual, emotional, and cultural premises prevent a complete understanding, an equal participation in others’ experiences, and a purely neutral viewpoint on events. Based on these considerations, the researcher-author can develop an *exotopic gaze* to try to create a space for receiving otherness, one that attempts to accommodate different perspectives on the world while also revealing the “implicit premises” of the research, or ‘the common way of framing events’ (Sclavi, 2012, p. 90, author’s translation).

Building on the reflections of these authors, who identify *exotopic listening* as a specific mode of interaction between the researcher-author and the research subjects, I began to wonder whether the pursuit of an exotopic listening perspective could serve as both a guiding principle for my visual field research and a theoretical lens through which to reinterpret the works of certain master filmmakers within the field of cinema of the real. Far from disregarding the observational tradition of ethnographic and direct cinema, this contribution seeks to define a form of exotopic listening grounded in fieldwork and influenced by reflections on the tension between listening and representation in these filmmaking practices. As discussed, the theoretical premises of this exploration suggest redefining the image as a complex web of mediations that involve the gaze, apparatuses, and other images, proposing that representation is not a transparent reflection but rather an opaque trace of reality.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> To explore these premises further, refer to T. W. J. Mitchell’s *Picture Theory* (1994), M. Cometa’s and *Cultura Visuale. Una genealogia* (2020). Regarding the perspective of visual anthropology, refer to the concept of *reflexivity* in *Transcultural Cinema* (1998) by MacDougall, recently reexamined by Paul Henley in *Beyond Observation. A history of authorship in ethnographic film*. (2020: 152-174).

In constructing a *listening gaze*, the invisibility of the observational mode could be likened to silence, allowing reality to emerge through the presence of an attentive author. By adopting this positioning, the filmmaker or researcher can attempt to create open spaces for listening, where the image is not only the result of negotiation between the subjects and the author but also receptive to perspectives that exist independently of the authorial project. Building on these explorations, the film *Aylesbury Estate* (2020) aims to construct a multi-voiced narrative that honours the diverse perspectives on the gentrification of the Aylesbury Estate. The views of architects Crallan and Nichols contrast significantly with those of the architect behind the new housing project set to replace the Aylesbury, which is called the Elephant Park; and these, in turn, differ from the perspectives of residents, activists, and representatives of the Southwark Council. The emergence of voices in the film does not follow a strictly chronological order in the editing, nor does it aim to create an objective, neutral, or complete account of the events. On the contrary, the camera, in its selective focus on certain witnesses over others, repeatedly sides with the residents of the Estate, thus emphasising the film's non-neutral stance toward the events. This becomes particularly evident in the scene where the Aylesbury residents meet with Southwark Council representatives during a public "Questions and Answers" session. Throughout the scene, the camera is physically positioned behind the residents' shoulders and there it remains for the whole duration of the scene, avoiding the usual alternation of shots and reverse shots, or a wider frame that would include both residents and representatives in the filmic space in a more balanced and equal way. As for the perspectives of the Southwark Council representatives and the architects, the camera adopts a more frontal position, both when capturing the events, as in the public meeting scene, and when filming dialogues between them and the filmmaker. In the latter case, the witnesses are not pushed to assert specific positions, for instance, through leading or provocative questions; the primary function of these scenes remains to understand and explore their points of view.

The editing also seeks to highlight the testimonies by giving more space to the parts most helpful in understanding the various perspectives on gentrification. For example, consider the film sequence focused on the future architectural landscape of the area, midway through the film. In the first scene of this sequence, Aysen, an Aylesbury resident, sitting in her living room, watches the promotional video for the new housing complex that the construction

company Landlease is building next to Aylesbury, the Elephant Park.<sup>55</sup> In the following scene, the young architect working on the Elephant Park explains the principles guiding the Estate's demolition process. The two scenes are connected by three brief shots of a part of the Elephant Park that has already been built, revealing that the young architect lives in an apartment within the new development, aligning his personal choices with his professional perspective on gentrification. Sitting in the living room of his new apartment, as he shows aerial images of the Aylesbury Estate to the camera, the young architect explains that while in the 1960s housing complexes like the Aylesbury were built on public land to provide decent homes for lower-income classes, today the focus is on constructing on private land to sell housing units to wealthy investors and increase construction company profits, land value and house prices at the same time. The scene is somewhat slow- the camera allows the architect to make his point freely, without any questions. The continuity established in the editing and the selection of the architect's commentary emphasise the intention to listen and understand rather than to criticise or challenge his views.

During various screenings of the film, both in-person and online, these aesthetic choices provoked differing reactions from viewers and commentators. Some, when confronted with the film's openness toward the new housing project, criticised it for not being sufficiently militant. Others, however, found the sequence to be a thought-provoking reflection on the seductive power of the promotional video for Elephant Park, paired with the architect's commentary. This sequence, which seems to normalise the dehumanising dynamics of gentrification, in some cases acted as a mirror, allowing certain viewers to recognise their own views of gentrification in contemporary cities as an automatic and inevitable process. This is likely due not only to the aforementioned material choices but also to the construction of horizontality and a listening space through deliberate aesthetic and positional decisions.

In the final sequence of the film, the former demolition worker Frederick faces the imminent eviction order from the Council. The demolition machines, which have been advancing into the heart of the complex over the months, are now destroying the residential block in front of his.<sup>56</sup> The situation is unbearable; Frederick locks himself inside his home to shield himself from the dust, the deafening noise, and the threat of the destruction of everything he knows. Driven to despair, he ends up taking his frustration out on his two dogs, who were left in his

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<sup>55</sup> The promotional spot for Elephant Park is available at the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BApQ9uphnoE>. Last accessed: February 2025.

<sup>56</sup> In the film, we know the machines are approaching as we hear the sounds of the demolition process getting closer and closer to the residents' windows.

care after the sudden death of his son. While editing this final sequence, I pondered for a long time whether to keep this scene, which shows the difficult experience of a person, particularly reflecting on his final words in the film: “Charlotte, you know, now I feel that this life with the dogs is no longer mine.” By that point in the research, the demolition had destroyed much of what we knew of the Aylesbury Estate. The images of this final exchange seemed to show a sense of disorientation that was relevant and that felt real to both of us. By calling me by name, Frederick broke the illusion of an invisible observer and revealed the presence of a participatory listener: until then, Frederick had not lived his experiences alone, but in front of someone who was recording him. For this reason, the sequence made it to the final edit. As these reflections suggest, constructing a listening gaze involves not only technical and aesthetic choices, and decisions concerning the positioning of the camera and footage selection, but also considerations around the order of sequences in montage.<sup>57</sup> *Aylesbury Estate* (2020) concludes with a shot of a display case containing keys from former residents of the already demolished parts of the complex, arranged in a circle on a blue velvet background (Figure 5).



Figure 5, Display case with the keys of ex-residents, from the film *Aylesbury Estate* (2020)

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<sup>57</sup> Regarding the editing choices within the scenes, having already clarified the criteria that determined the selection of the edited parts, this mainly involved constructing a rhythm as harmonious as possible to make the narrative understandable and accessible.

In the image, the keys vary in shape, size, and colour; some are attached to tags or keychains, others are old and rusty, and some appear to have been forged more recently. Each key becomes a relic of an individual story of erasure that we do not know, which not only involves the physical demolition of a significant collective reference in London's cultural and political history but also the metaphysical destruction of relationships, memories, lifestyles, ways of thinking, and ways of inhabiting the city. As glimpsed through the two preceding shots, the image of the display case is from an exhibition on the gentrification of Aylesbury Estate. The continuity of sound and visual post-production with the previous scene suggests that the exhibition takes place near the Aylesbury Estate, in a time close to, or contemporary with the demolition processes.

In an initial rough cut of the film, the sequence was positioned just before a closing scene in which Frederick spends some of his last moments at home with his dogs shortly before the eviction. Later on in the editing process, the sequence was moved to the very end of the film. In the first position, the images of the display case seemed to act as a bridge between sequences, performing the function of simply emotionally preparing the viewer for the conclusion. When placed at the end of the film, however, the display case challenges the entire narrative, questioning the notion that an artistic process can be considered completely finished, objective, true, or ethical. The keys remind us that through the film, we have heard some perspectives among many; the film is in itself a key within a multitude, being the result of a selective and subjective gaze. The fact that the display case is part of an exhibition on the Aylesbury prompts a final reflection on the two artistic processes of the exhibition and the film *Aylesbury Estate* (2020). Both can be interpreted as cultural excavations aimed at uncovering necessary fragments of reality; or they can be viewed as the materialisation of more or less voyeuristic and subjective impulses of the artists. These two perspectives can alternate or even coexist within the same image, which serves the goal of stimulating these explorations, until the final frame. In this way, the film can provoke reflections on cinema and on a hypothetical listening gaze as a tool for approximation towards the creation of 'open' spaces for contemplating the relationship between images of reality and the invisible, and their irreducibly multidimensional, opaque, and fragmented nature.

### **Listening distance and relational slowness. Documentary as a political and ethical act of resistance**

Listening, as opposed to observing, refers to a perceptual process that is less selective and more immediate: in listening, we remain dynamically connected to the source and experience

the space between ourselves and reality as a connective and conductive field of cognitive possibilities (Voegelin, 2018). In the philosophical tradition, the mind perceives reality objectively through sight.<sup>58</sup> But who is watching? From where? And why? If such questions are not posed, the gaze of the classical philosopher ends up resembling a surveillance camera, recording events from a fixed and universal point of view (Cavarero, 2005, p. 36). By contrast, a hypothetical *listening gaze* is constructed after accepting that there is a subjectivity that experiences the real in a specific way, or through a given physical and spatial positioning; while a subject can choose to observe from a wide range of distances, listening requires a specific positioning at a distance of about one metre.<sup>59</sup> In the scene in question, the architect is situated at a *listening distance* from the camera. The 40mm lens, a type of lens which more than others mimics the human way of seeing the real, moves in search of a horizontal position relative to the subject, rather than observing it from above or from below. The handheld camera allows for this tension, adapting to the movements of the subject and aiming for the ongoing recovery of an horizontal relationship. These technical and relational choices are not limited to this scene, but are maintained throughout the film, with the exception of location images, which required the use of different lenses and greater stability in filming to give justice to the architecture of the complex.

As the making of *Aylesbury Estate* suggest, a critical element of the listening gaze is the role of time in structuring the documentary experience. Many traditional documentary forms operate on a narrative-driven urgency, condensing events to fit a coherent, linear structure. However, filmmakers like Wiseman and Costa work against this impulse, instead foregrounding duration as an ethical tool, as we explore further in the chapter *Exotopic forms. Honouring the real*. Film scholars have looked at slowness in documentary forms and cinema through two lenses. First, by mapping slow cinema as an aesthetics approach- a cinematic style that, according to Flanagan, “privileges a number of distinct and recognisable tropes:

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<sup>58</sup> In ancient Greek, truth (*alethes*) is presented as that which is not in the shadow, that is what can be seen under the light; the verb *theorein* means to contemplate with the mind but also to see with the eyes; platonic ideas are considered the visible products of the mind, and so on.

<sup>59</sup> Documentary film director and editor Frederick Wiseman, for example, by also handling the direct sound recording in his films, literally listens to the events, and this is formally reflected in a filming style that breathes with the witnesses, who are never positioned at unnatural distances from the direct sound recording. The editing also follows this movement, not only by stretching the time, which seems to follow the natural rhythm of the dialogues but also by constructing a polyphony of voices that seem to be driven by their own consciousness rather than adhering to the author's narrative plan. A plan that, incidentally, does not exist, as Wiseman has stated in various interviews that he directs his films without conducting preliminary site visits and without writing detailed subjects or screenplays.

the application of the long take, an undramatic narrative or non-narrative structure, a tendency toward realist or hyperrealist representation, and a pronounced stillness of composition and visual content” (Flanagan, 2012, p. 2). Second, by distinguishing between the linear, traditional experience of cinema historically, at 24 frames per second, in a darkened theater, and contemporary forms of spectatorship, involving digital tools that allow spectators to pause, rewind, fast-forward, and slow down film, creating new ways of engaging with the moving image. Laura Mulvey’s concept of “delayed cinema”, as outlined in *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006), revolves around the shifting nature of and the experience of time in cinema due to technological advancements in two directions: the temporal delay in viewing, or the opportunity for viewers to halt the flow of film, revisiting specific moments repeatedly, which allows for a deeper engagement with individual frames, bringing cinema closer to photography in its ability to capture stillness; and the deferred spectatorship, which Mulvey draws from Freud’s idea of *nachträglichkeit* (deferred action), suggesting that certain cinematic moments or details might not be immediately registered in their initial viewing but gain significance retrospectively. This echoes the idea that cinema preserves moments that can be rediscovered and reinterpreted later (Mulvey, 2006).

The relationship between time and the listening gaze, however does not relate to aesthetics (slow cinema) or spectatorship (delayed cinema), as examined by Flanagan and Mulvey, respectively (Flanagan, 2012; Mulvey, 2006), but to slowness as a relational modality in the rapport between documentary authors and the real they represent. In this framework, slowness becomes a relational attitude that, resisting capitalist logics of efficiency, visually translates into a listening gaze that produces images with the purpose of creating aesthetic, ethical and political acts of resistance. This configures slowness as a way of relating as well as a way of seeing, which can be assumed by authors, witnesses and spectators alike.

## **Conclusions**

As this section explores, documentary images, as a field of encounter between the author and the subjects, tread a difficult line between the need to approach a multifaceted and elusive reality and the need to explore various dimensions of representation. In retracing the visual research that led to the film *Aylesbury Estate* (2020) and through the analysis of some sequences of the finished film, these reflections have sought to identify the construction of a subjective listening gaze to conduct field research through cinema, drawing on theoretical developments in Visual Culture regarding the multidimensional nature of the image, and

investigations into the exotopic listening relationship between author and protagonists in the polyphonic novel. The exotopic relationship between authors and witnesses will be further discussed in the chapter *Exotopic forms. Honouring the real* The hypothesis of an exotopic listening gaze aims to create, through precise aesthetic and positioning choices, a cognitive space open to the coexistence of different perspectives, thus continuing to question the implicit premises of visual research. These attempts seek to uncover fragments of reality, which appears known or familiar within the limited field of the visible, while confronting the limitations of documentary imagery, the opacity of the gaze, and the partial and subjective nature of cinema.

## 7. Listening positioning. Field notes on the making of the film *Listening Centre*

### Introduction

Between 2018 and 2023 I frequented and filmed in several listening centres in Palermo. Listening centres in Palermo are open spaces where anyone of any faith or cultural background can go to be listened to by a trained volunteer as they share their story during the course of a listening session. The visual notes gathered became the core footage for the documentary film *Listening Centre*, which is currently in the editing stage. This chapter does not aim at analysing the film's final form, but rather at exploring the ways in which the listening/exotopic positioning practiced in listening centres might contribute to documentary filmmaking and documentary film scholars. Specifically, I seek to understand the ways in which the practice of listening, as observed in Listening Centres, inform documentary filmmaking methodologies and scholarship, particularly in relation to dialogical, ethical, and reflexive approaches to representation. Following is a list of the kinds of questions the finished film might raise:

*Ethical & Political Dimensions of Listening:* (1) How do Listening Centres function as spaces of ethical listening and relational knowledge? (2) In what ways do they challenge hierarchical and institutional structures of social care?

*Listening and Identity Formation:* (1) How does the act of listening influence self-narrative and identity transformation, particularly for marginalized individuals? (2) How do the dialogic strategies used in Listening Centres facilitate shifts in self-perception and agency? (3) How do they influence individuals/communities in challenging social contexts?

*Ethics and documentary film:* (1) Given people's full consent to being filmed, is it more ethical to film people's vulnerability or to look away from it? What makes the relationship between filmmaker/researcher and witnesses an ethical one in a confidential setting? How does a director reconcile their ethical obligations towards their witnesses with the necessity to represent reality with integrity for the audience? (2) Can a film about listening centres show how at the heart of their listening practices lies trust-building through listening? Given that in

listening centres trust is not assumed but earned, and it forms the foundation for meaningful dialogical encounters, can a film show how this is achieved through non-judgmental listening, which allows participants to feel seen and valued? (3) Can a film show how ethical listening can serve as a form of resistance to hierarchical and paternalistic structures? Can it show how, by prioritizing relational ethics, listening centres create spaces where individuals can reclaim their narratives, fostering self-agency and challenging systems of marginalisation? (4) Does the presence of the camera in a confidential setting contribute to dissipating shame? Does listening through the camera aid private and social shifts?

*Documentary Film as a Listening Practice:* (1)How can documentary filmmaking adopt a listening positioning rather than a purely observational or expository stance? (2) What are the ethical and methodological implications of filming listening as a social practice? (3)Can listening practices and their influence be investigated through documentary practice in a way that enriches both? (4) Given that listening centres challenge the notion of listening as passive reception, reframing it as an active, relational engagement that requires vulnerability and mutual respect, how can a film about listening centres reframe listening from a neutral act to a deeply ethical practice that shapes and is shaped by power dynamics?

*Reflexivity & Participation in Documentary Practice:* (1)How does the presence of the camera shape the interactions within Listening Centres? (2)Can participatory and reflexive filmmaking approaches amplify marginalized voices without appropriating them?

## **Methodology and theoretical framework**

The methodology behind this fieldwork is grounded in arts-based research (ABR), which situates artistic practice as both a means of representation and an integral part of the research process (McNiff, 2013; Barone & Eisner, 2012; Given, 2008). The theoretical framework draws on documentary filmmaking as both a reflexive methodology and a tool for listening to the real (Nichols, 1991; Scalvi, 2012; Bourdieu, 2015), starting from the perspective of documentary filmmaking as a material and immaterial structure that, under certain conditions and authorial positionings, can inscribe ethical spaces and promote ethical gazes (Sobchack, 2004), as well showing how meaning is dialogically co-constructed, a perspective that integrates Bakhtinian dialogism and exotopia (Bakhtin, 1981; Bakhtin, 2000; Todorov, 1995) and theories of listening as both a social and political act (Cavarero, 2005) and a method for socio-anthropological enquiry (Scalvi, 2012). Listening practices within listening centres are examined through Rogers' elaborations on the person-centred therapeutic approach (Rogers,

2018), the dialogical intersection between experience and narrative (Bruner, 1987), and the act of listening as an agent of a radical acceptance of otherness (Irigaray, 2008). In the following pages we look at how documentary filmmaking captured listening methods as practiced in listening centres; then, we attempt at framing this listening methodology through ten attitudes that were both observed and filmed in centres; finally, we argue that the listening positioning that emerges configures itself as not only a *way of seeing* or as a *way of doing* but as a *way of being in dialogue with the other*, a stance that might be relevant for documentary authors as an approach that stems from and moves beyond participatory filmmaking.

### **Listening centres in Palermo**

Since 2018, I have approached, frequented and filmed in the following listening centres in Palermo:

#### **Religious centres**

- Listening centre (Centro di Ascolto) Agapè, managed by Caritas (a catholic foundation devoted to help those affected by material and immaterial poverty) in Piazza Santa Chiara/Ballarò, a historical area of Palermo known for its cultural diversity and relevance, as well as a high concentration of criminality;
- Centro di Ascolto di Corso Tukory (Chiesa di S. Antonio di Padova in Corso Tukory, Palermo), Centro di Ascolto dei Decollati (Chiesa parrocchiale Maria S.S. del Carmelo Ai Decollati in Via dei Decollati, Palermo), and Centro di Ascolto del Duomo (Duomo di Termini Imerese, Termini Imerese). These centres were led by a group of volunteers coordinated by members of the local churches.

#### **Secular centres**

- Centro di Ascolto Don Orione (Via Ammiraglio Rizzo, Palermo), managed by a secular NGO;
- Centro di Ascolto MeravigliosaMente, via La Loggia, Palermo, managed by a group of volunteers from a cultural association (Associazione Culturale MeravigliosaMente).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> This list refers to the years 2018-2023; this specification is needed since it happens that centres are discontinued; sometimes they reopen under different names and/or in different locations.

As I could observe, the various centres were marked by profound differences. Some were religious, while others were secular. Some were led by national, powerful organisations like Caritas, while others emerged from the initiative of local communities or associations. The religious centres' volunteering teams were typically coordinated by members of the church as part of their compensated duties, while the secular ones were founded by associations which benefited from government funds or private donations. Some had an open overarching theme/objective. For example, the Listening Centre in Corso Tukory was committed towards strengthening the dialogue between different cultures and religions in a diverse area of the city; the Centre "MeravigliosaMente" was particularly equipped to support people experiencing mental health challenges and their families. These objectives stemmed from either the mission of the leading association, and/or from the specific needs that the area of reference presented. The religious centres were designed to welcome people that resided within the geographic area of competence of the local church. When a person from outside the area of competence of the local church approached said centres, they would redirect the person to their church. When the church in question did not have a similar service/centre, the person was welcomed regardless, and the criteria of the residence no longer applied. The secular centres were open to anyone from anywhere since they operated as a single entity instead of a network of centres. The centres also differed in the way people accessed the service. Most centres ran on a first-come, first-served basis: visitors would show up at opening times and start queuing to access a listening session for the day; some however operated on an appointment basis for recurring visitors.

In addition to these deep differences, the listening centres I frequented also presented striking similarities. Firstly, listening sessions were primarily conducted by unpaid volunteers and followed similar patterns across different centres. Secondly, the volunteers were trained by the centre to become skilled listeners. And thirdly, the primary focus of the centres was to create a space in which visitors could feel heard and seen. In the centres that I frequented, listening sessions could last anywhere from ten minutes to an hour, depending on individual needs of visitors, time availability of volunteers, number of people queuing, and scheduled arrangements (when in place). The sessions typically took place in a silent room with closed doors that were set up to foster an intimate dialogue, with visitors and volunteers all sitting on similar chairs at conversational distance. The visitors were usually welcomed by the lead listener while a second volunteer took care of the notes. In some centres there was a certain

degree of flexibility to this arrangement, and visitors could request to speak to one preferred listener only. In these cases, the listener, if allowed by the visitor, quickly summed up any relevant notes right after the meeting. During the session, while the visitor talked about various aspects of their lives, the listeners were trained to give them space by remaining silent for most of the time, except for clarifying questions when necessary for comprehension and short validating statements. The listeners were also trained to restrain from commenting or interrupting the visitors to allow as much as possible a free flow of consciousness. When there was availability, the meetings ended spontaneously as the visitor felt like the flow had come to a natural closure. If there were a time limit, it was typically agreed upon at the beginning of the session, and the visitor was guided towards a closure by the volunteers as the time ran up. If any request came up during the session (for example of specific advice or economic support), the volunteers took the request to their internal weekly meetings. The group discussed requests, made a decision, and communicated it to the person at the next meeting.

## **Listeners**

The volunteers that run the listening sessions were often either psychologists or social workers in training who sought to gather first-hand experiences of listening, or individuals employed in unrelated sectors who wanted to give back to their community in this specific way. Most of the volunteers I met were highly motivated and spent several hours working at the centre every week. During my time at the centre I investigated the roots of their motivation by conducting informal interviews, some of which were recorded or filmed. From these recordings emerge that in many cases their sense of belonging came from shared values and group loyalty; in others it stemmed from experiencing some form of angst from living and working in an urban environment that was perceived as alienating. When asked to expand on this, some linked feelings of anxiety and loneliness to the impersonal ways in which people related to each other at their workplaces (one of the volunteers I interviewed was a lawyer in training; another was a student of criminology working in a secretariat; a third was working in a municipal office); to them the more humane mode of relating in listening centres was refreshing and comforting, and ignited the desire to engage consistently with its activities. Many of the volunteers I spoke with derived a sense of satisfaction from pursuing the fostering of listening relationships with visitors at the centre. Another volunteer from one

of the centres in Palermo said that they work at the centre to remain grounded with reality; they noted that, in a society where the virtual world as a fake and perfect representation of reality is aggressively taking space, they experienced a strong social expectation of hiding personal challenges; they noted for example that in the historical centre of the city is rare to see a person with disability, and this is because people with disability tend to live behind walls, at home or in dedicated structures because of the feeling of shame they trigger in their family members and carers. Another volunteer added that in Palermitan houses the biggest and most luxurious room is usually the living room and it is typically set up to impress guests rather than to cater the needs of the family. They said as an example that their mother, whose son was a surgeon, used to ask the domestic collaborator to hang the family laundry inside their apartment, but she would hang the son's medical gowns outside their balcony herself, as a way of flagging to the neighbourhood that their son was an important member of the community and that she was taking care of him personally rather than delegating his laundry to the domestic collaborator. The two concluded that they felt that in the city of Palermo there is a strong custom of hiding that which is considered socially undesirable, and to put forward the image of perfect and socially relevant families.

These recollections of volunteers reflected a thought-out modality of relating to visitors that the listening centres I had access to implemented intentionally to combat impersonal interactions, which differed from that of any other office setting I can think of. As the head coordinator of one of the centres observed during a filmed meeting, when individuals approach any city office in Palermo, like in most Italian cities, they struggle to feel like they are talking to human as even making eye contact with officers feels difficult because of the presence of physical barriers like plexiglass panels, especially common after the pandemic, and because of the immanent presence of often cumbersome technical appliances like computer screens, which inevitably attract the gaze of officers and mediate interactions, bringing them towards more alienating modalities. The listening sessions on the contrary, intentionally happen free of the presence of any technological appliances (computer or other); the volunteers are usually two for each session so that one can converse with the person without losing eye contact, while the other takes notes.

## **Listening sessions**

As I could observe and film, in listening centres everything, from the setting of the room to the schedules of volunteers, was arranged so as to foster trust and care in the relationships between listeners and visitors. Volunteers were usually required to work at the centre on given, semi-fixed days of the week, so that recurring visitors that came back on the same day could expect to speak with listeners they had met before. The goal was to build certainty and continuity to foster trust. Before the session began, the volunteers' focus was on welcoming visitors. In the listening centre of Corso Tukory for example, volunteers were instructed to stand up and walk towards each visitor, inviting them to sit down first, instead of remaining seated and waiting for the visitor to walk to the chair on their own. In this specific centre, the listening sessions took place in a particularly spacious room which had the entrance facing a courtyard facing the street. The objective of this set-up was to ensure that the visitor feels heard, seen and welcomed, and that they found it easy to exchange verbal and non verbal information. There was typically no to little mention of past or future meetings; the focus was on the present recall and sharing of events. The visitors were given full power over their narratives. During the listening sessions I filmed, the volunteers often listened to the visitors as they changed their narratives in ways that felt both contradictory and transformative to witness. At the same time however, if granted permission from visitors, the volunteers catalogued notes of the sessions in case they needed to get a hand on the person's history either for comprehension, or to share any specific request with the volunteers' group. The notes were archived anonymously by visitors' assigned number to protect their privacy.

## **Documentary film as a reflexive research method**

In the film, the camera adopts a posture of "listening" to the listeners at the centre, who, in turn, listen to the stories shared by visitors. The narrative examines the centre's operations and the relationships of listening it fosters with its regular visitors. At the same time, it indirectly collects essential testimonies from a community grappling with a profound health, economic, social, and cultural crisis. Ultimately, this work aspires to spark a broader reflection on the potential of cinema as both an artistic and academic research tool, positioning documentary filmmaking as a medium for deep inquiry and creative exploration. The use of documentary film in academia as a research tool is not new within the umbrella of arts-based research methodologies (or ABR), a term referring to artistic and narrative research approaches in

which artistic practices serve not only as a means of representing data and/or research findings but also as an integral part of the research process itself. ABR enables researchers to use their artistic inclinations, experiences, and expertise to understand, investigate, and represent human experiences within the contexts under study (McNiff, 2013). Compared to other methods, ABR allows researchers to capture the narrative dimension of reality in which the emotional responses of the individuals involved in the study are embedded; whereas traditional quantitative and qualitative research aims to uncover "truth" or plural, subjective "truths," ABR seeks to generate doubt, disrupt assumptions, reveal perspectives, and create experiences that can only occur through a work of art (Given, 2008, pp. 29-30); some scholars have argued that ABR allows researchers to record and, simultaneously, participate in the emotional experiences with others, resulting in methodologies that hold unique reflexive possibilities (Barone and Eisner, 2012, pp. 8-9). Given the differences between ABR and other qualitative methods, Barone proposed three specific criteria to evaluate the quality of the art material collected: first, the work must resonate with others, given that "the research must have reconfigured features of the observed world into a virtual world that is not literally true but plausible, credible, and possible- one that resonates with the experiences of the percipient or reader." (Barone in Given, 2008, p. 31). Second, the research output must be compelling; and third, it must include elements of universality, rather than being relevant only in a local context (Barone in Given, 2008, p. 31). The making of *Listening Centre* attempted to align with Barone's criteria, as the film's participation, as a work-in-progress, to the film festivals and film development events listed above seems to suggest.

In this framework, documentary cinema creates a space for research, performance and resistance, by giving voice to the "subjects" of a research. In line with the Barone and Eisner's framing of ABR, The making of the documentary *Listening Centre* was meant to not only document the practices of the centres, but also to actively engage with their dialogical principles. The presence of the camera inevitably altered the dynamics of the interactions it sought to capture in clear and subtle ways; the objective of the fieldwork however was not to observe the objective experience of listening centres, but to be part of/be transformed by the experience, and share it with an audience (an aspect that will be incorporated in this work once the film is completed and released).

During the filming of *Listening Centre* approximately ninety hours of footage were collected; the footage included listening sessions as well as training on listening skills and internal

meetings. A range of twelve visitors were followed in their listening sessions with volunteers over time; in addition to these, many others were recorded on audio. Entering listening centres with documentary film equipment has allowed me to elaborate what is proposed in this work in three ways that are unique to ABR. First, filming activities in centres meant I could review and re-analyse footage, which meant I could train, educate and reorient my gaze and positioning based on what I was learning about listening practices in centres; this informed both the film and the theoretical elaboration of a listening/exotopic positioning. Second, documentary film practice, as an horizontal and immediate medium, could both capture the dialogic dimension of listening sessions as they happened while also being part of it, which informed the elaborations on the dialogic aspects of documentary. Third, unlike traditional qualitative and quantitative methods or other artistic techniques within ABR, documentary film captured both the psychological, relational, and embodied dimensions of emotions, including body language, facial expressions, and vocal tone, as they were anchored to and/or evolved from their socio-cultural contexts.

Documentary images are reflexive in three ways. First, as we will explore further in the section *Notes from the field. Towards a listening positioning*, they are a reflexive arts-based research method (Barone and Eisner, 2012; Given, 2008). What does it mean for a research method to be reflexive? According to Scalvi, reflexivity allows the researcher to explore their emotional reactions and intellectual elaborations in a way that clarifies the “implicit premises” behind the relationship between researchers and the subjects of their research; for this reasons, the methodology she proposes in anthropological and sociological field research indicates that the researcher must slow down and take note of their reaction to their shared experiences with the research subjects. In this framework, a narrative style that includes the researcher’s experience is more appropriate for reporting research field notes (Scalvi, 2012, p. 162). Similarly, arts-based research advocates argue that film as a research method captures aspects of the experience that would otherwise remain invisible, with the potential power to resonate deeply with audiences; it configures itself simultaneously as a way to shape the research experience, investigate the field, and make visible the research results (Barone and Eisner, 2012). Second, documentary images are subjectively reflexive in that they reveal specks of the subjectivity of their authors- primarily, their gaze, or *way of seeing* the real. Third, documentary images are “reflexively reflexive”, to borrow an expression from Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological inquiry *The weight of the world* (Bourdieu, 2015, pp.37-41, and pp.

807-850). Gathering a rich array of in-depth interviews, personal testimonies, and narrative accounts from individuals living on the margins of society by engaging with the lived experiences of those who suffer under structural inequalities, and reporting these dialogues, Bourdieu's and his team's efforts seek to illuminate how objective social structures and power relations shape subjective experiences of misery, poverty and marginalisation. Based on a unique ethnographic, reflexive and receptive research method, the key elements to Bourdieu's "anti-methodological" approach, as Tarantino and Petrillo framed it, are a horizontal positioning of the researcher with respect to the research subjects, as a result of which the researcher's central role becomes that of giving a voice to otherness; a listening approach that is both active and non-directive, as well as methodic and rigorous; and the absence of commentary or analysis of the research data, or the reported dialogues between researchers and participants- a way of proposing the research findings that resonates with the making of a documentary film that gives voice to witnesses. Bourdieu's "reflexive reflexivity" implies that the researcher is critically aware of his own positioning and biases, as well as of the dialogical aspects of the relationship between researcher and subjects, and their implications for the co-construction of the research findings. As Bourdieu explains in the final note to the work, the only part in which the sociologist writes about his approach: "Only reflexivity, synonymous with method—but a *reflective reflexivity*, grounded in a *craft*, in a *sociological eye*—allows one to perceive and control, in the very act of conducting an interview, *as they happen*, the effects of the social structure in which it takes place. How can one claim to practice the science of presuppositions without first equipping oneself with a science of one's own presuppositions? (...) The positivist dream of perfect epistemological innocence conceals the fact that the real difference is not between a science that constructs and one that does not, but between a science that constructs without knowing it and one that, being aware of this process, strives to understand and master as fully as possible both its inevitable acts of construction and the equally inevitable effects these acts produce." (Bourdieu, 2015, p. 809, author's translation).<sup>61</sup> In resonance with Bourdieu's methodology,

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<sup>61</sup> Translated from: "Solo la riflessività, sinonimo di metodo, ma una *riflessività riflessiva*, fondata su un "mestiere", su un "occhio" sociologico, permette di percepire e controllare *all'istante*, nell'atto stesso di condurre un'intervista, gli effetti della struttura sociale nella quale si compie. Come pretendere di fare la scienza dei presupposti, senza dotarsi di una scienza dei propri presupposti? (...) Il sogno positivista di una perfetta innocenza epistemologica nasconde, infatti, che la differenza non è tra la scienza che opera una costruzione e quella che non lo fa, ma tra quella che lo fa senza saperlo e quella che, sapendolo, si sforza di conoscere e padroneggiare, nel modo più completo possibile, sia i suoi inevitabili atti di costruzione, sia gli effetti che, in modo altrettanto inevitabile, questi atti producono."

documentary film has the power to make this reflexive reflexivity process visible, *as it happens*, as an open dialogue not only with the real it represents but also with the spectator, given that the filmic text can be reinterpreted by audiences as time and contexts of the film release shift.

In Bourdieu's method, the act of listening has a core significance, and it configures itself as exotopic, even though no explicit reference to Bakhtin is made. In Bourdieu's words: "The sociologist can enable the interviewee, especially one who is socially distant from them, to feel legitimized in being who they are—if, through their tone and, above all, the content of their questions, they can demonstrate that, without pretending to erase the social distance that separates them, (...) they are capable of *putting themselves in their place in thought*." (Bourdieu, 2015, p. 814, author's translation).<sup>62</sup> Such positioning of the researcher "It does not mean projecting oneself onto the other, as phenomenologists suggest. Rather, it means offering oneself to a general and genetic understanding of what the other is", which makes the act of conducting this type of reflexivity in research "a spiritual exercise." (Bourdieu, 2015, p. 813-814, author's translation).<sup>63</sup>

### **Filming in listening centres. Access, trust, and visual approach**

After initially frequenting the centres for a long time, sometimes months, with the camera and microphone present and switched off, to observe all activities, I subsequently begun to film, and filmed as much as possible, whenever permission from individuals was granted, after a relationship of trust was established, along with the full understanding of my intentions and projects from the witnesses' part. The first objective of the visual research has been to begin filming listening sessions as they happened. As expected, introducing filming equipment in an intimate space of exchange required months of preparation, attempts and setbacks. At first, the primary concern for volunteers and coordinators was to find a way to respect the privacy of the visitors. After many conversations, when they understood that the camera would never frame anyone without their consent, they allowed me to ask visitors if they would be open to

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<sup>62</sup> Translated from: "Il sociologo può ottenere che l'investigato, più distante socialmente da lui, si senta legittimato a essere quello che è, se attraverso il tono e soprattutto il contenuto delle sue domande sa manifestargli che, senza fingere di annullare la distanza sociale che lo separa da lui (...) è capace di *mettersi al suo posto nel pensiero*." (Bourdieu, 2015, p. 814).

<sup>63</sup> Translated from: "non significa operare la proiezione di sé nell'altro" di cui parlano i fenomenologi. Significa offrirsi a una comprensione generica e genetica di quello che è." (Bourdieu, 2015, pp. 813-814).

adhere to the film project. During this time and at all times I would always keep the camera and microphones with me. The consistent presence of the filming equipment, albeit switched off, was crucial in developing an honest, authentic relationship; the witnesses never fell in the illusion that my presence was motivated by (solely) affection and friendship; they were constantly reminded of my role, my objectives and what was going to happen if affirmative conditions occurred. We would choose amongst the recurring visitors and ask them if we could film them after we had been granted permission to witness their listening sessions without filming for some time (usually weeks). This conversation around consent always happened right before the listening session in the presence of volunteers. Some not only agreed to be filmed but were also excited about my presence, and that of the camera. One said that if their story was acceptable for the camera, then it meant that their story was acceptable. After receiving this kind of feedback from the users, the initial doubts dissipated, and both volunteers and coordinators became fully on the side of the project. Their enthusiastic support was not only necessary but an essential part of the filming process.

The centres I frequented the most, and in which I subsequently filmed most of the footage, were based in Ballaro/Oreto. This happened because the groups of volunteers there were particularly open towards my filming activity, and because the centre had some relevant peculiarities for my research: first, at this centre the visitors were mostly recurring, while most of the volunteers had been working there for months or years, and thus their relationships were well established, some since a long time; in many cases, they had a profound transformative effect on the visitors, as well as expanding the experience and listening skills of the listeners. Second, the volunteering groups were particularly united since they had been working together for a long time. In the listening centre based on Corso Tukory in particular I could follow a regular filming schedule of two half-days a week from February 2020 to February 2023 (with some interruptions in 2020 and 2021 caused by COVID-19 related lockdowns).

The first filmed scene of a listening session dates back to the end of 2020. It is a long sequence shot without cuts or interruptions of a listening session, filmed with a hand-held camera and mostly framed as shown in Figure 6 below. As shown in the image, the overall visual approach of the footage implied to filmed visitors in ways that the camera would not capture their faces frontally or fully, not so much to protect their identities, but to shift the focus from the visitors to their relationship to listeners, as well as to reflect the level of intimacy they had developed with the filmmaker and camera's presence. The positioning of

the camera in the space gradually shifted during the shots and amongst footage from different days as the relationship with witnesses developed in the course of the research; when the relationship became more rooted in reciprocal trust, the camera spontaneously got closer to them, and the frames included more of their faces' profiles.

The sequence shot and the hand-held camera were chosen as the preferred filming method for various reasons. The first benefit of sequence shots is that they enable the camera to capture multiple shot sizes (usually a wide, medium, and close view of the scene) and to switch between them quickly, which allows the frame to adjust to the situation with a minimal amount of movement. Second, given that sequence shots can either be left uncut or can be cut smoothly from smaller to larger frames without jump-cuts, filming in sequence shots creates footage that presents more options during the editing process, which is a great advantage when reality is filmed as it happens and it can be difficult to understand the full meaning of the footage at the time of filming. Third, and most importantly, the handheld camera brings in the frame the subtle presence of the filmmaker through the imperceptible movements of the camera, that, even in stillness, are inevitably generated by their breath and micromovements of the arms; sequence shots breathe with the filmmaker, mirroring the non-repeatable and irreversible flow of interactions and micro-reactions of the camera to the events as they unfold; for this, they can create a greater immersion and involvement of viewers in what they see, and they can foster attunement between the viewer and the soul rhythm of people that are being filmed. Sequence shots make viewers and the filmmaker feel like they are accompanying witnesses like travel companions. Fourth, the sequence shot filmed with a handheld camera reveals more than other approaches how relationships are being constructed between the filmmaker, the volunteers and regular visitors of the center, and the viewer, as the filming happens. This visual approach captures their in-the-moment, dialogic co-construction of meaning, for example by showing spontaneous changes from one frame to another, or by following a spontaneous movement or gaze. Through the sequence shot, these decisions are taken in real-time, as a consequence of the immediate interactions between elements in and outside of the frame. As they spark the curiosity of the filmmaker, their desire to get to know or feel more guides the focus of the camera. As the camera builds the sequence shots, images emerge and take shape according to these decisions and shifts in focus, and the viewer can see more clearly how both the real and its interaction with the filmmaker/camera evolve dynamically.



Figure 6. *The first footage from listening sessions*

From the footage gathered, the camera was mostly welcomed as a way to reinforce the feeling of being heard and seen (see the cases discussed below). The light but professional equipment helped to frame the relationship as a professional one. I would usually introduce myself shortly at the beginning of the session, and ask for permission to witness the session. When I asked for permission to film after a couple of sessions, I specified that the answer was completely unrelated to their relationship to the center. The camera often captured the facial expressions and gestures that signaled the building of a relationship- the visitors smiling as they entered, the hand-shakes with the volunteers before they sit down; the way they would greet each other before and after holidays, or if they had not seen each other for a long time; nonverbal elements that suggested affection and gratitude. As the footage of many of the sessions I filmed shows, the visitors' body language was also revealing- often, they entered the centre with a curved back and closed shoulders, and they left it with a more open posture and a lighter way of walking.

### **The project of the film**

Given the initial observations of the listening centres activities and after having filmed a number of listening sessions as described above, a provisional synopsis of the film came to shape: "The film is a close look within the walls of the Listening Centre of Palermo, a place where anyone can go to share their stories with a trained listener. The film is more novelistic

than journalistic or political, and it observes all interactions within the listening centres: the listening sessions, the internal meetings (during which the staff redefines their approach, discusses individual cases, and makes budget decisions), the waiting room, the Secretariat, and the mandatory training sessions provided to new volunteers on the following topics: “Becoming a listener in contemporary society”, “Listening with empathy”, and “Evaluating the impact of listening practices”. The film captures the various collaborations of the Centres with psychologists, social scientists, and members of the Catholic Church (CARITAS, and specifically a group of Franciscan Friars) while investigating the functioning of the Centres’ methodology of social intervention based on the act of listening. The film will primarily follow a selection of visitors who attend the weekly listening sessions regularly. We will select them based on their consistency with appointments, and on the main themes of their stories, in order to cover different areas of intervention of the centres, such as for example domestic abuse, loneliness, homelessness, discrimination, and life after prison. Defined by the management as a “relational space”, the Centres seek to tackle these other epidemics of our time. The film captures the development of unique relationships between the people visiting the centres and the listeners. Session after session, we see how the act of listening builds connection and trust in the characters and we follow their journey, with all the setbacks and the steps forward. The narrative structure is linked to this progressive reveal of their inner strength and hidden resources. While their stories unfold, we follow the internal functioning of the Centres through the staff meetings, and we learn more about listening skills through the training sessions. The camera follows other secondary characters who approach the Centres with less consistency but with relevant stories. The film shows how, during and after the pandemic, the Centres are more than ever a reference point for the community, and especially for women, who are managing increasing levels of stress while caring for their children, the elderly and the sick; like Stella, a homeless woman who has to medicate her son with colon cancer every day. Some women, like Carmela, approach one of the Centres to share their story of domestic violence, and through the listening sessions, they find the courage to voice the abuse for the first time. Although most of the people approaching the Centres are women, there are also some men, like Fernando, who is a survivor of racial discrimination, and couples, like Giuseppe and Mariangela, who attend the listening sessions together to fight loneliness after his son estranged them. The primary focus of the film, and what glues together all the stories, is the unique relationships that form during the listening sessions

between the volunteers and the people who share their stories. Culturally diffident towards official institutions, and sometimes involved in not-so-legal activities, the people approaching the Centres want to speak with an ally who will not judge them, report them or try to fix them. By penetrating the walls of listening centres with a camera for the first time, the film is a historical and empathic account of universal stories from a diverse community that is facing a global crisis with little support from the government. The people that decide to be part of the film welcome the camera as a way to reinforce the undivided attention they look for. The listening sessions give audiences ethical access to intimate stories that reveal a shocking social picture, made of voices that are not easily accessed, and that would otherwise remain unheard.”.

Along with the synopsis, a statement regarding the general visual approach took form: “In making *Listening Centre* we choose a humanistic angle on contemporary topics. The methodology behind the film is Wisemanian: a small team with a listening attitude towards the unexpected; in this case however, the observational approach blurs the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction cinema since there is little to no intervention from our part in the film. The camera listens to the visitors being listened to by the volunteers; functioning as an artistic meta-method, the film seeks to understand if and how the Centres’ methodology works in building trust in interpersonal relationships. The handheld camera listens to reality with presence without being intrusive, and it gets closer and closer to the people as the relationships grow; the aesthetics of the film will reflect this progression in the relationship. The visitors are filmed mostly from behind, but as the relationship grows, the viewer gets access to more visual information on their physical appearance (as shown by comparing figure x with figure y). Although the camera rarely leaves the internal places where the Centres are based, in the film there is a growing presence of the external world. The nearby food market with its screaming vendors is narrated first through the soundscapes penetrating inside the Centres, and then through various tableau vivant that portray the street life as seen from the windows of the Centres. The camera captures drug dealers, mafia-related fights, and prostitutes in the daylight with decadent WWII ruins and baroque churches in the background. Special attention is given to sound. The editing favours sequence shots to respect the rhythm of reality whilst building a compelling narrative structure made of a mosaic of universal stories from the listening sessions, as well the internal world of the centres: their school for the new listeners, and the meetings of the management.

In the film, the visual approach is in service of the ethics of the relationships, not the other way around. It is the relationships with the people we film that dictate how we film them, especially at what distance. The editing also follows ethical considerations: the events are edited to reflect what we felt was going on at the time of the shooting, with an effort to cut out what is unnecessarily dramatic, or anecdotic.”.

During the development and production stages, the film project participated in key industry events, including:

- The EURODOC Workshop on the Development of Feature-Length Documentaries, April 7–12, 2020;
- *Europa Creativa*, Media Talents on Tour, with stops in Bari (October 18–19, 2021), Catanzaro (October 24–25, 2021), Potenza (November 4–5, 2021), Palermo (November 17–18, 2021), and Naples (November 24–25, 2021);
- The Jihlava International Documentary Festival’s New Visions Forum in Jihlava (Prague), October 28–31, 2021;
- The official presentation at the professional day of the 62nd *Festival dei Popoli* in Florence (November 26–27, 2021).

These events allowed the film project to evolve, gaining valuable feedback and confirming international interest at festivals. What captured the most attention was the innovative approach of using the experience within the listening centres—translated into cinematic imagery—to develop a theoretical reflection on listening as a method of inquiry and representation in documentary filmmaking. Current plans to complete the film includes show a rough cut of the work to the listeners and visitors of the listening centres I filmed in, and to film the discussion after the screening, including as many perspectives as possible, given any consent constraint; this final reflexive scene aligns with participatory action research in that it involves capturing and reflecting on real-life practices by creating a space for individuals to express and both inform and transform their experiences and those of others (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000).

### **Dialogic listening**

Aligning to Bakhtin’s reflections discussed earlier in this work, listeners in listening centres are trained to not see visitors as the passive receivers of an act of service, but as individuals

with a great capacity for self-reflection and self-interrogation; in these capacities lies their potential to change; often, the listener's role is "simply" to create a space both physical and metaphysical in which they can become aware of this ability; the beginning step towards creating such space is to consider visitors as "agents of change" (Way, Kanak Zwier, and Tracy, 2015, p. 721). As it has been shown, interview subjects are capable of articulating thoughtful reasons for their actions and decisions, often demonstrating a nuanced understanding of the contexts they navigate—even if this understanding is not framed in social scientific terms (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000, p. 573); furthermore, a dialogic approach "allows people to suspend assumptions about the world, open themselves to new view- points, and abandon a win-lose perspective. When interviewers engage in dialogue, participants are met by kindness and acceptance, enabling them to let down their defenses and listen to themselves" (Way, Kanak Zwier, and Tracy, 2015, p. 722). However, during conversations, listeners/researchers might focus on interpreting participants' responses in ways that prevent them from building moments in which individuals are free to reflect on their own perspectives, recognize opportunities for transformation, or actively reshape their viewpoints. To prevent this, Way, Kanak Zwier, and Tracy mapped three main dialogic strategies to allow the interlocutor to expand on their opinions and beliefs about the world, so as to give them space to elaborate and ultimately challenge them- Probing questions (questions to allow the interlocutor to expand on their story, such as "Why?", "Why not?"; "Why do you think that is?", etc.); member reflections (interactions that make the interlocutor feel seen and heard); and counterfactual prompting (imaginative questions such as "If you had a magic wand, what would you change about the situation?", "Can you imagine what it might be like . . . ?", or "What might be the benefits/challenges for that person?"), (Way, Kanak Zwier, and Tracy, 2015, Table 1. Interactional Strategies That Accompany Participant Self-Reflexivity. Strategies and tactics, p. 729).

From the recollections of listening sessions as captured through the footage, audio recordings and field notes, we can observe that probing questions and member reflections were largely used by listeners; counterfactual prompting strategies were not part of the listeners' training and instinctive ways of interacting, and as such were very seldomly deployed; instead, listeners frequently resorted to silence- intentionally remaining silent after statement, which often worked as a prompt the speaker to elaborate- and intentionally reposing the same questions either later in the same conversation or in subsequent listening sessions, which had

the dual effect of exposing any intentional or unintentional mystification of the events, and allow the speaker to tell a different version of their story; even though differences were often nuances, reposing questions, coupled with integral acceptance of the answer as if any incongruence was unnoticeable, often allowed the speaker the reflexive intervals they needed to make cumulative shifts towards a better story about themselves. To see some aspects of these strategies at play, see the excerpts from my notes reported below. These notes are not meant to replace the film's footage, but to serve as a complimentary resource at a time in which the film is yet to be finished; they are field notes and not direct transcriptions and thus include some personal reflections.

### *Reposing inquiring questions*

From my field notes: today a woman with a baby who was a few months old came in. The listener asked at the beginning of the session how she was doing, if she was sleeping enough; the woman also had a 2-year-old daughter and a dog; both her and the children's father were formally unemployed, navigating economic difficulties on a day-to-day basis; these information suggested she was struggling; the woman's words and tone of voice however contradicted this suggestion. From the notes of that day: it is the second time that Sara comes in for a session; when asked if she is sleeping at the beginning of the conversation, Sara responds: "Yes, both my children slept through the night since they were small, we are very very lucky, in this and many other regards; at the moment, I am struggling to care for the dog, we live on the fourth floor of a building with no elevator; taking the dog out is hard, with all the stairs and the kids". The rest of the session is about the kids, Sara asks the listeners if they know places where to exchange kids clothing, then she asks for directions; it feels as if Sara is visiting the centre to engage in small talk with adults, and to gather information, more than to delve deeply into uncomfortable aspects of her experience as a new mother; during the conversation, the small baby is wrapped in a baby carrier on his mother and is half asleep. She is about to leave when one of the listeners compliments the baby for being so quiet the entire time of the session; then, they ask her again- is he this good and quiet during the night? After a pause, Sara responds: "I am so used to getting only a few hours of sleep that I don't notice anymore; it has been like this for years, since my first pregnancy; at night it is difficult to fall asleep because of the economic worries I have". As her eyes tear up, she gets up to leave. I would not be surprised to see her again next week; some kind of protective barrier came down."

### *Presence of the camera*

Massimiliano approached one of the Centres to access a listening session many times in a row without finding the courage to enter and speak with a listener. One morning, he finally walked in, quick-paced and visibly agitated. He sat on the chair and immediately started speaking, words coming out of him in a fast and confused flow. During the first session he expressed anxiety, discomfort, and the unwillingness to tell his story because it was too shameful, and then left. After a couple of weeks, Massimiliano returned to the centre, and entered the session declaring that, after a deep examination, he had decided that it was better for him to speak. Then, he started to cry. After sobbing for a minute, witnessed in silence by the volunteers, he begun talking about the abuse he suffered from his local priest, who offered him food and money as a way to relieve him of the condition of poverty he leaved by at in time “in exchange” for sexual abuse. As he recalls: “I still think of him and what he did to me; the way he forced me down on the chair while he took his penis off his trousers. He was my boss and the priest of my church, and I trusted him. I still cannot find the words to tell anyone, but I know my friend hears me crying in my sleep...I feel dirty. I am ashamed”. Letizia, a new volunteer at the Centre, listens to him with attention, but when she learns he was sexually abused by a priest she starts to nervously tap her pen on the table. She is visibly uneasy and keeps looking in the direction of the camera, as if to question its presence; her facial expression indirectly questions whether it is ethical/permissible to film this particular interaction with Massimiliano; her concerns might regard his declarations, or his long-lasting hesitation before he could voice his story at the centre. The camera is filming him in a way that does not reveal his face and focuses on the listeners as usual. At one point of the long sequence shot in which he speaks in unsettling detail of his experiences, against all predictions, he turns directly to the camera and continue to speak looking in the lens, as if telling the story directly to an imaginary audience; I remain focussed on my job, that of filming, and I restrain from any comment, question or other reaction; after a couple of minutes in which Massimiliano speaks to the invisible audience, explaining the importance of letting out his experience, he returns to talking to the listener; after some time, he expresses relief. He leaves the session in a much lighter mood. After he exits the room, I run after him to ask him for his formal consent to filming, explaining that I will cut out of the material any details regarding his personal information, or that of the priest and church where the abuse took place according to his recollection of events; I also explain the project and ask whether

he is comfortable with my presence and that of the camera, and if he would like to share his contact details to invite him to a future private projection of the film for participants only. He agrees and explains that he felt seen and important, that the presence of the camera made him feel like he had an important story to tell; just a few weeks prior this scenario would have felt unfathomable for him, as he was feeling “like a nothing”.

#### *Listening to hidden feelings under cover-up feelings*

Rosalia lost her job as a housecleaner after the Coronavirus outbreak. She cannot afford to buy stationery for her eight-year-old niece, who sells roses to tourists after lessons at primary school to contribute to the family budget. Despite this, she is always making jokes with the volunteers; today, her niece, who has an eyesight problem, broke her glasses, and she cannot afford to cover the cost to repair them. She comes into the listening session almost running, holding her niece’s broken glasses; she sits down and starts talking as if she has been sitting there since before; our perception is that she is resuming a conversation that stopped only moments before: “My niece...She sees nothing. I have twenty Euros, yes...But when I opened the fridge this morning, all I saw was bottles of water. Water, and water, and water! We need some solids to eat; she needs to eat before she needs to see.. Am I right?”. The tone in which she speaks makes it sound very funny; the volunteers however restrain from laughing, as they get the subtext of her communication, a feeling of desperation covered by a humorous tone.

#### *Silence*

Lia and Piero come to the Centre every week. When I meet them, they are coming from the psychiatric clinic where their son was hospitalised after attempting suicide. “It was Sunday. I was confessing my sins to the priest when my cousin phoned me; ‘Login on Facebook, Lia, immediately!’ My cousin was screaming through the phone; I was so embarrassed; the whole Church heard her from the speaker. ‘Your son has announced on Facebook that he is going to kill himself before lunch’. I ran home in panic, and I found my son on the kitchen floor, covered in vomit. He had swallowed some of my pills, so I put my fingers in his throat to make him vomit more”. Lia’s voice is shaking, while her husband, Piero, is crying. The listener, Sara, remains silent; her expression conveys empathic understanding but she restrains from saying or doing anything. “Last year, we took him to an exorcist priest, but it didn’t work”. Sara, the volunteer, stands up to hug Lia and they stay in a long silent hug for some time. Now the son has been hospitalised in a psychiatric ward. After a long silence,

Sara says: “Your son is in an excellent clinic; this will work and he will feel better soon”. Lia breathes in and breathes out. After several minutes of silence, she says: “Thank you, Sara, thank you so much. Thank you for listening”, and she leaves. The husband Piero did not say a word the entire time, only stared at the floor and occasionally looked in Lia’s direction. They leave the session walking differently, as if they left a big weight in the room behind them.

### *Reframing*

Carmela, a married woman with two children, attended the centre weekly for about six months in 2021. Some of the volunteers had spotted her around the neighbourhood at night in the months prior and suspected she was a prostitute. As it came out during sessions, Carmela was physically, emotionally and financially abused by her husband. Carmela was a person with limited economic, cultural and relational resources and with life experience that was rooted in Palermo. In the context of her experience of life, a violent husband was a recurring and to some extent accepted reality. During her first meeting at the centre, Carmela talks about her husband's abuse but never uses the term abuse, rather she states that her husband, when seized with anger caused by her presence or (apparent) faults, slaps her. As she recalls, the husband had been violent since the beginning of their relationship, with episodes of hitting both her and the children occurring daily. In more recent times, these episodes had increased in intensity considerably, to the point where Carmela was at times unable to be seen in public because of the bruises on her body and face. This intensification of the violence of the attacks was what brought Carmela to the listening centre. During the first listening sessions with volunteers, Carmela does not identify as a victim of abuse as based on her experiences she does not have access to these concepts/words. She simply talks about her husband becoming too angry and wishes she were more patient with him; she talks about the abuse as if she is referring to a normal reaction to her supposed increasingly low shortcomings. During informal discussions amongst volunteers after listening sessions with Carmela, the volunteers would describe her condition as affected by both material and immaterial poverty, as it included limited access to material things such as food, clothing, education, work opportunities, as well as non-material resources like self-awareness. As the footage shows, the listeners, by posing questions and through summarising statements, reflected and rephrased Carmela’s experience to her, allowing her to become familiar with new vocabulary, and to progressively reframe her experiences as abusive thanks to new

thought-forms and more appropriate words to describe them. The following table summarises the dialogic listening strategies that I observed and filmed in listening centres.

*Table 1 - Dialogic listening strategies and examples*

| <b>Dialogic listening strategy</b>            | <b>Examples</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Inquiring questions                           | <p>“How are you?”; “How was your week?”; “Why?” or “Why not?”; “Why do you think that is?”</p> <p>“What do you think?”</p> <p>Avoiding finishing participants’ sentences</p>                                                                               |
| Reposing questions                            | <p>Rephrasing the question</p> <p>Asking old questions again in different moments of the session, or in the following sessions, without making a reference to the previous answer</p>                                                                      |
| Expanding questions                           | <p>“Tell me more...”; “What happened then...”</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Validating statements and reassuring comments | <p>“I understand how...”; “I can imagine...”; rephrasing their statements and repeating them back to them; Expressing understanding of/agreement with participants’ opinion/point of view.</p> <p>“It’s okay, you can cry/leave now/stay longer, etc.”</p> |
| Reframing                                     | <p>Repeating the speaker’s statement using more appropriate words</p>                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Silence                                       | <p>Remaining silent; leaving long pauses before commenting or asking questions; avoid “filling in” silences</p>                                                                                                                                            |

### **Towards a listening positioning.**

As shown above, listening centres propose a dialogic model for radical acceptance of alterity that poses the act of listening at the centre, not as a static feeling but as an active practice. In this framework, listening triggers transformative paths through the recognition of the other in their uniqueness, starting from welcoming their vocal expression.

In *For more than one voice: toward a philosophy of vocal expression* Adriana Cavarero explores the concept of voice not just as a medium of speech, but as an embodiment of individuality and relationality; she argues that voice is inherently tied to one's presence and identity, emphasising its unique and unrepeatable nature and its significance in preceding and generating meaning in communication. Cavarero traces the historical marginalisation of the voice, beginning with Plato's dismissal of oral discourse in favor of written text, which he saw as more stable and detached from the speaker; since then, the philosophical tradition has prioritised content (*logos*) over emotions and identity of the speaker (*phonè*), which has led to a focus on an abstract/anonymous what over a particular/embodied who. Rather than merely recovering the voice, Cavarero advocates for an ethics of listening—one that recognizes the uniqueness of each speaker and the relationality inherent in vocal expression. She challenges the traditional hierarchy that privileges the speaker over the listener, arguing that ethical relationships are based on attentiveness to the other's voice, not just their words. This shift reframes communication as an act of presence and vulnerability rather than mere information exchange (Cavarero, 2005). In the context of the listening centres, the political dimension of the voice that Cavarero highlights is of crucial importance. Marginalised individuals often experience a deprivation of voice, meaning their perspectives, needs, and desires are systematically ignored or suppressed. This silencing not only deepens social exclusion but also reinforces a structural cycle in which poverty is not merely economic but also communicative and political. Without a recognized voice, individuals are denied their fundamental right to participate in public discourse and democratic decision-making. Political systems that fail to amplify these silenced voices effectively erase their presence, perpetuating inequality and injustice. The lack of vocal recognition sustains existing power structures, preventing those affected by poverty from influencing policies that shape their lives. Addressing poverty, therefore, requires more than economic interventions; it demands the creation of spaces where all voices can be heard, valued, and acknowledged as part of a truly inclusive political landscape. The listening centres I observed and filmed in Palermo function as experimental spaces of this kind, directly confronting a form of *immaterial poverty*—the inability or lack of opportunity to use one's voice as a means of agency and recognition.

Cavarero's *ethics of listening* as applied in listening centres would be framed by Luce Irigaray as loving listening. In *The way of love*, Irigaray explores the concept of love as an ethical and philosophical path that enables a true relationship with the other. Starting from a critique of Western philosophical traditions, particularly their emphasis on sameness and the

reduction of difference to the logic of the universal, she proposes love as a way of encountering the other without assimilating or objectifying them, fostering an intersubjective space where difference is preserved rather than erased. One of Irigaray's central concerns is how language shapes our relationships; starting from a critique of the ways in which dominant linguistic structures reinforce a lack of true dialogue between genders, Irigaray elaborates on the ways in which traditional discourse tends to appropriate or define the other within preexisting categories, failing to allow the other to speak from their own place, a shortcoming that calls for the development of a new kind of language—one that does not impose predefined meanings but instead allows for openness, ambiguity, and mutual transformation; this requires an attentiveness to both the way words are spoken, as well as the silences that accompany them; linking affection to a broader philosophical and spiritual practice, Irigaray suggests that love, when understood as a respectful engagement with difference, becomes a path toward transcendence—not in a religious sense, but as a way of going beyond one's limited self to encounter the infinite depth of the other (Irigaray, 2008). A similar significance was given in listening centres to silence and affectionate acceptance, building the foundation for an holistic approach that fostered a deeper connection and understanding between individuals, transcending conventional boundaries and promoting more inclusive and empathetic forms of communication.

As the experiences reported above suggest, the work of listeners in listening centres differs from that of psychotherapists in that it does not primarily focus on the individual's psychological well-being or personal development, nor does it establish rigid boundaries between the listener and the speaker in terms of self-disclosure. Unlike therapy, which often follows structured and compensated interventions aimed at facilitating psychological growth, the listening centres operate as open, free, non-hierarchical and non-structured spaces where the act of listening itself is the primary form of support. However, their approach does align with certain principles of the therapeutic relationship, particularly in fostering a non-judgmental, empathetic, and presence-centered dialogue. Rather than guiding the speaker toward a predefined goal, the emphasis is on relationality, trust, and the recognition of the other's presence and voice as a fundamental aspect of agency and social belonging. In these respects, their approach resonated with Carl Rogers' therapeutic method, the person-centred approach, also known as client-centred or humanistic therapy. Focusing on the client's capacity for self-direction, and the importance of a supportive therapeutic relationship based on experience grounded in the present moment, Rogers' work is built on the belief that individuals possess the innate capacity for self-healing and personal growth

(which he calls self-actualisation), while therapists must commit to “congruency” (or authenticity) and to “an unconditional positive regard” (non-judgemental acceptance) toward their patients (Rogers, 2018; Rogers, 1961). Rogers’ starting point is an unconditional and transcendent trust, or faith, in humanity, and beyond; as he writes: “I hypothesize that there is a formative and directed tendency in the universe, which can be observed and traced in stellar space, in crystals, in microorganisms, in the most complex organic life, and in human beings. This is an evolutionary tendency toward greater order, increased complexity, and a more intricate interrelation. In the human species, this tendency manifests as a progressive sequence that begins with a single cell and develops into a highly complex organic functioning, into knowledge and perception below the level of consciousness, into the organism’s awareness of itself and the external world, and ultimately into a transcendent awareness of the harmony and unity of the cosmic system, including humankind.” (Rogers, 2018, p. 143, author’s translation).<sup>64</sup>

In listening centres, the approach that I observed and filmed operates on the premise that the identity is shaped by the stories it tells, and vice versa, the identity informs its narratives; because of this, holding up a space in which to shift a person’s narratives, has an effect on their behaviours and experiences. The connection between life and narratives was explored by Jerome Bruner’s psychological take on the formation and resistance to change of the identity (Bruner, 1987). In his investigations, Bruner’s look at shared narratives is also relational- narratives are in dialogue with previous discourses and, at least at a deep level, the result of the co-construction of meaning between speaker and listener; as he puts it: “Life stories must mesh, so to speak, with a community of life stories; tellers and listeners must share some “deep structures” about the nature of a *life*” (Bruner, 1987, p. 699). According to Bruner, given that “world-making” through speech is a function of the mind, our formal or informal autobiographies become ways of “life-making”; in his words: “I believe that the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualising that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into

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<sup>64</sup> Translated from: “Ipotizzo che ci sia nell’universo una tendenza formativa e direzionata, che può essere osservata e ricostruita nello spazio stellare, nei cristalli, nei microrganismi, nella più complessa vita organica e negli esseri umani. Si tratta di una tendenza evoluzionistica verso un ordine maggiore, una complessità più grande e un’interrelazione più articolata. Nella specie umana, questa tendenza si rivela come la serie progressiva che ha origine nella singola cellula e che giunge a un complesso funzionamento organico, al conoscere e percepire al di sotto del livello di coscienza, al farsi conscio dell’organismo e del mondo esterno, alla consapevolezza trascendente dell’armonia e dell’unità del sistema cosmico, compreso il genere umano.” (Rogers, 2018, p. 143).

memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future. I have argued that a life as led is inseparable from a life as told—or more bluntly, a life is not “how it was” but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold: Freud's psychic reality.” (Bruner, 1987, p. 708). However, in his views, shifting the identity's narratives is difficult and requires metaphysical input; as he discusses: “certain basic formal properties of the life narrative do not change easily. Our social research excursion into experimental autobiography suggests that these formal structures may get laid down early in the discourse of family life and persist stubbornly in spite of changed conditions. (...) So perhaps a metaphysical change is required to alter the narratives that we have settled upon as "being" our lives. The fish will, indeed, be the last to discover water, unless he gets a metaphysical assist.” (Bruner, 1987, p. 709). In Bruner's view, the intellect alone is not enough for the person to understand the context they are immersed in (the water, in Bruner's metaphor); to see themselves “from the outside” and transform, the person needs metaphysical guidance (Bruner, 1987, p. 709); hence, Bruner suggests a process of transfiguration, one that has a spiritual component.<sup>65</sup>

These reflections trigger some thoughts in relation to the experience of listening centres. First, as Bruner suggests, the construction of a person's autobiography, including the words that they use to describe an experience, reveal crucial information about who they (think they) are. For instance Carmela who did not use the word “abuse” in relation to her violent husband until the listening volunteers in the listening centre held a space for her to reframe her experience as abusive. Second, if a person's experience is constructed and made predictable by their stories, changing the spoken story becomes as relevant as changing the identity and the behaviour, which emphasises the social and political significance of the voice and of spaces like listening centres. Third, as Bruner suggests, the person might experience, in the relationship with a listener, a shift that has a “metaphysical quality” (Bruner, 1987, p.

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<sup>65</sup> See for instance the connections drawn by McCabe (2015) between Jung's concept of spiritual awakening and the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). As McCabe highlights, Jung's influence on AA can be traced back to his correspondence with Rowland Hazard, an early member whose discussions with Jung ultimately contributed to the development of AA's foundational philosophy. The Twelve Steps emphasise the necessity of a spiritual shift or connection with a higher power, a principle that resonates with Jung's notion of individuation—the process of integrating different aspects of the self to achieve psychological wholeness. Jung's idea of *spiritual awakening* closely parallels the transformative experiences sought through the Twelve Steps. He argued that the root of many addictions stems from a spiritual void or a disconnection from the deeper self or the divine. This perspective aligns with AA's belief that recovery extends beyond physical sobriety to encompass a form of spiritual renewal, positioning addiction not merely as a behavioral issue but as a deeper existential crisis (McCabe, 2015).

709). This perspective opens to further investigations on religious listening centres specifically, and the role of faith in the development of their approach to listening.

In summary, as the experiences and observations described above, as well as both the footage and the process of filming in listening centres suggest, a *listening positioning* configures itself as not only a *way of seeing* or as a *way of doing* but as a *way of being in dialogue with the other*. Our filmed and recorded notes suggest that a *listening positioning* comes forth from the following ten attitudes: (1) Non-judgemental acceptance. Listeners strive to provide a non-judgmental, accepting environment, showing genuine care and respect for visitors regardless of what they share or how they behave (within the range of what is civil and legal). This unconditional acceptance helps clients feel heard, valued and understood. (2) Balanced empathy: listeners work individually and in teams to deeply understand the subjective experiences of visitors by attempting to see the world from their perspective but knowing that it is impossible to know what they are experiencing. This balanced connection helps visitors feel heard and supported, fostering a safe space for exploration and healing. (3) Authenticity. Listeners attempt to be genuine and transparent with visitors, not hiding behind a professional facade. This authenticity helps build trust and encourages clients to be open and honest about their thoughts and feelings. (4) Non-hierarchical approach. Listeners' goal is to establish a horizontal relationship with visitors. This intention is reflected in how the room is set as much as in how the service is organised, as well as in how the listening sessions are conducted (as discussed above). (5) Self-agency. There is the underlying belief that everyone has an inherent drive towards self-improvement, either the amelioration of one's present circumstances or even the realisation of one's full potential. The role of the listener is to facilitate conditions that allow this natural tendency to flourish. (6) Non-directivity: The listener does not direct the course of the listening session. Instead, they support visitors in finding their own answers and making their own decisions, believing that clients are the best experts on their own lives. (7) Focus on the present: While past experiences are not ignored, the emphasis is on the client's current feelings, thoughts, and experiences. The goal is to help clients understand and navigate their present circumstances and emotions. (8) Focus on the subjective and shared experience of the visitors and listeners over objective truth. (9) Focus on listening over hearing. In listening centres, the subjective experience of the people involved emerged through listening, which presented as much more than simply hearing the words someone says. Hearing does not qualify as listening as much as speaking does not imply comprehension. Listening implies exercising a focus; it happens when both people are engaged and feel the engagement of the other. In this respect, listening is inherently

dialogical; it only happens in connection with otherness; hearing, on the contrary, can be unidirectional, involuntary, disengaged. (10) An unconditional loving regard for otherness, and a “faith” in the transformational potential of the relationship with the other through being present and anchored in the present moment.

### **Beyond participation. Listening positioning in documentary**

At the very beginning of this work, we have set out some of the ethical dilemmas that documentary image-making raises. Looking at documentary film as a research method in listening centres poses specific ethical concerns in relation to filming witnesses in a vulnerable state, as they share intimate and often painful personal narratives. As we have discussed, some scholars view filming people in a situation of perceived vulnerability, as pushing an ethical boundary, even if users consent on being represented (Sontag, 2003). In light of this, filmmakers ought to question if there are ethical ways to continue making necessary, ethical, and relevant representations of the real- images that we feel we need to process and share experiences, as well as to raise awareness, provoke thought, expand the collective and individual perceptive and intellectual horizons.

In the pages above, we have described some of the ways in which our filmed explorations in listening centres, in search of not only a film, but also an ethical approach, suggest that a listening positioning based on an affectionate relationship of trust that is renovated over time might mitigate these concerns more deeply than relying on informed consent (which may result from a superficial decision, or a decision that might shift over time) or participatory filmmaking practices that entail the direct involvement of witnesses in the filmmaking process. Participatory practices might only partially address the perceived imbalance in power between filmmakers and subjects that Nichols identified and Piotrowska elaborated, as previously discussed in the first chapter of this work under the section *Documentary as dialogue* (Nichols, 2014; Piotrowska, 2012), given that certain asymmetries, such as access to resources and the mastering of crucial filmmaking skills, such as the critical awareness of how meaning is constructed through documentary film, cannot be easily bridged.

Some of the experiences I had with visitors of listening centres reinforced these ideas by suggesting that the presence of the camera can act as an antidote to negative views of oneself. An emotional state that recurs in listening centres is that of shame. Breneé Brown argues that shame is produced socially whenever people are not allowed/encouraged to express their vulnerability; the antidote to shame is empathy (sharing one’s vulnerability and being met with presence) (Brown, 2006; Brown, 2012). Trained volunteers in LCs encourage people to

break through their shame. Similarly, by breaking confidentiality, the presence of the researcher/filmmaker in LCs in some cases potentiates the validation that the users are looking for (see the section *On the presence of the camera* below).

As we discussed in the section *Dialogues of images, images as dialogue*, Sobchack introduces the “ethical gaze” as an ethically responsible way of seeing that must neither be too detached, reducing the subject to cold observation, nor too intrusive, turning suffering into spectacle. It operates within the tension between presence and distance, ensuring that engagement with the real remains both responsible and self-aware. This balance acknowledges the subject’s dignity while resisting the impulse to aestheticize or overexpose vulnerability. In Sobchack’s words: “Signs of the filmmaker’s situation and stance (quite literally, ‘attitude’) are, for example, inscribed in and visibly represented by the camera’s stability or movement in relation to the situation that it perceives, in the framing of the object of its vision, in the distance that separates it from the event, in the persistence or reluctance of its gaze in the face of a horrific, chaotic, unjust, or personally dangerous event.” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 243). Similarly, Sara Cooper writes of the necessity for filmmakers to bridge a “respectful distance” from which to meet and film the other, on the basis of a philosophical view of otherness grounded in Levinas’ studies (Cooper, 2010, p. 58). Based on our recollections of the experience of listening centres, an ethical listening positioning possesses the ten qualities that we have described in the previous section. In our hypothesis, such positioning might leave visible traces in documentary representations, a possibility that we will explore in the chapter *Exotopic forms. Honouring the real*.

## **Conclusions**

The methodology and practices of the listening centres in Palermo illuminate an innovative and dialogical approach to addressing both material and immaterial poverty, emphasizing the transformative power of listening as an ethical and relational act. By adopting an approach rooted in non-judgmental acceptance, balanced empathy, authenticity, self-agency and present-focused, non-directive interaction in non-hierarchical spaces that place listening to at their forefront, listening centres serve as experimental spaces that challenge traditional dynamics between service providers and participants, proposing an alternative mode of relational knowledge, capable of transcending reductive frameworks of power and hierarchy. Some aspects of these listening practices resonate with the philosophical and methodological frameworks of Carl Rogers, Michail Bakhtin, Adriana Cavarero and Jerome Bruner,

converging on the ideas that identity is shaped and reshaped through narratives, that narratives are co-constructed in dialogue with their contexts, and that the act of liberating vocal expression has both individual and collective expansive potential, given its political and social dimension. The inclusion of the researcher as both observer and filmmaker further underscores the reflexive nature of this inquiry, situating the making of the documentary film *Listening Centre* as both a creative and scholarly act. This integration of theory and practice offers a lens to explore the transformative potential of dialogical listening, contributing to identifying a “listening positioning” and considering how this way of relating with the real/the other might contribute to broader ethical, social, and political interventions in contexts of marginalisation, as well as in documentary film practice as research. As discussed earlier, our hypothesis is that assuming a listening positioning might leave visible traces in documentary images; we explore this further in the chapter titled *Exotopic forms. Honouring the real*, in relation to the work of Eugene W. Smith, Pedro Costa and Frederick Wiseman.

**Multidimensional truths.**

**Representing the real**

## 8. Lucid dreaming. *On Akka's Shore* (2018)

The documentary *On Akka's Shore* (2018) is the first feature-length film by Lebanese-born and London-based visual artist and filmmaker Umama Hamido. A deeply personal and yet collective collage of voice recordings idiosyncratically edited over non-explanatory visual notes, the film exemplifies how documentary images can transcend mere representation, serving as portals for layered interpretations and interactive dialogues. Operating across multiple temporal and spatial layers, weaving together personal memories, collective histories, and imagined futures, the film blurs the lines between past and present, documentary and dreams, inviting the spectator to interpret the images through multiple lenses. Formally, Hamido incorporates a range of visual elements and styles, including archival footage, reconstructed scenes, and poetic montages, to reflect both the fluid and overlapping nature of memory and identity, as well as to reflexively explore the possibilities of documentary filmmaking in creating multidimensional images. The film's premise is the deep and true friendship between Hamido and palestinian refugee Tareq Al Jazzar, who also lives in London. Hamido's collaborative and attuned approach to filmmaking translates into images her dialogues with Al Jazzar, while also fostering a dialogue between the images and audiences since, by presenting dreamlike visuals and fragmented narratives, the film challenges viewers to actively participate in meaning-making rather than passively consume the film.

As they both try to rebuild their lives in London, Hamido and Al Jazzar's goal is to make a subversive and shared visual account of their stories of readaptation to a new place that puts into question every foundational prejudice around the lives of refugees. Midway through the film, with the ease and confidence of a close, life-long friend, Hamido candidly asks Al Jazzar, who has spent some time in a refugee camp in the suburbs of Beirut: "Tell me about the camp"; and Al Jazzar replies: "The camp is the best place in the world. Yes, the camp is the best place in the world. You know why? Because it is a piece that got torn out of Palestine and tossed into another place, just as it is. People there, they don't care if you are rich or poor, they don't care if you are healthy or unhealthy. People there, they don't care if you are beautiful or ugly. People there, they live day by day. They don't think about tomorrow."

In the film, Hamido and Al Jazzar's relationship of affection develops into an artistic collaboration in which Hamido's filmmaking skills meet Al Jazzar's poetry and performativity as a rapper. Their artistic encounter and the decision to make a film together allows for a fluid merging of not only life experiences and memories but also skills: during the course of the film, Hamido approaches poetry, while Al Jazzar discovers the world of images. As a result, in the film's story, Hamido's images are directed by Al Jazzar's words, while Al Jazzar inspires Hamido to record her own voice performing a text that feels like a hip-hop song. This multidimensional vocal, textual and visual dialogue is possible thanks to an attitude of profound listening between one another, which makes images resonant with words on a deep level, and vice versa. This visual and textual dialogue develops as fast as their relationship strengthens, to a point where it lacerates the boundaries of time and space; from here, Hamido and Al Jazzar almost become a single consciousness as they give life to a strange hybrid, shared memoir that spans from Hamido's youth in Beirut, Al Jazzar's experience in the Palestinian refugee camp, and their present life in London.

On both a thematic and formal dimension of meaning, the film is a documentation of the fluid lived experiences of war refugees who like water float unrooted from place to place. As Hamido explains to film scholar Andrea Luka Zimmermann during a conversation on the film at Whitechapel Gallery in 2022, her intention was to document Al Jazzar's stories in relation to the Palestinian struggle firstly by audio-recording their spontaneous conversations, rather than conducting formal interviews with planned questions.<sup>66</sup> The same spontaneous urge to document their lives is also what guides the making of many of the images in the film, which emerge as impressionist visual notes of joint walking journeys of Hamido and Al Jazzar at the discovery of London. In the images, the element of water returns over and over in various forms: images of the sea, close-ups of rain drops, the rain tickling on the windows of a bus, the river Thames as seen from various London bridges. Water becomes the material and immaterial substance that glues all the memories together, and the element at the centre of the many significant shifts in the story of the film: Al Jazzar's complicated birth as his mother's waters broke; the cup of water that was worth a cup of blood as people were dying of thirst at Al Jazzar's Palestinian refugee camp when it was under siege during the Lebanese Civil war; the water that a refugee must often cross to get somewhere safe but distant from their home; the sea water of Acca's shores, the place to which Al Jazzar dreams of returning,

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<sup>66</sup> Conversation between Andrea Luka Zimmerman and Umama Hamido, available on the Whitechapel Gallery's youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuMvnd50ZxI>. Last accessed: February 2025.

even for just one day. Another recurring element in the film that is linked to water is the image of seagulls, and their sounds. Again, Hamido's images mirror Al Jazzar's fascination for the birds.

As much as Hamido's first desire is to document the real, the author is aware that her portrait of Al Jazzar is also a construction of her subjective gaze. Hamido films Al Jazzar in a fluid, evanescent way, with a portable, handheld digital camera. Most of the images portraying him are shot in a spectral atmosphere, as if Hamido's goal is to venture into the dark corners of Al Jazzar's inner world. Even though the filming style is observational and many shots are filmed with a telescopic lens, which implies a physical and metaphysical distance from the subject, Hamido's camera feels close to Al Jazzar, almost structuring his shadowy memories and giving weight to his spectral presence. Al Jazzar on the other hand is almost escaping the frame, and the spectator struggles to grasp any defined, recognisable feature of his bodily figure and face. When he reappears again and again in the film, it feels as though he is in front of the camera for the first time. The surreal environments in which Hamido films him - a long, dark, empty corridor in a hospital-like structure; a strangely lidded room that looks like a prison cell - contribute to create the impression of a strange interworld suspended between light and darkness, emptiness and crowdedness, movement and stillness. As Hamido declares "I saw Jazz (Al Jazzar) like a ghost in the city. As someone who is watching and has got superpowers and is able to do many things. When I filmed him I was following my instinct and wanted to film him like a ghost". The film becomes a performative reflection on the universal theme of belonging, and on the liquidity of shared memory, on how images of memories can draw from collective imaginaries, dreams and shared stories. The editing also contributes to the film's performative dimension by deploying the use of the layering of images. In an emblematic sequence of the film, Hamido appears in the images, layered over some archive footage of Beirut that she had shot from her window (again, a glass with rain on it), while her voice recalls: "Yesterday I dreamt that I was flying over the streets of Beirut. I was my camera, my body and my eye and all of me was one with the lens. You asked me how it was. I told you, the feeling resembles everything in it. Do you think places get stuck in time when we leave them?". The reflexive dimension of the film becomes tangible as the author steps in front of the camera and the voice-over becomes a face. When asked by Zimmerman about the decision to become herself a witness in the film, Hamido's response hints at a question of ethics: "It felt fair because I'm presenting Jazz's story and I am part of it as

well.”.<sup>67</sup> The author looks at Beirut through a transparent barrier, a metaphor for her subjective filters. The film cannot be a simple, straightforward act of documentation because it is to some extent a subjective invention of reality.

As this sequence anticipates, the film is also a reflexive meditation on documentary filmmaking as a collaborative and multifaceted craft in which documents, witnesses, performances, dreams and visions coexist. As Hamido’s words hint, the film’s voice-over at times contemplates on the process of filmmaking and the sharing of intimate images and stories: “Yesterday I dreamt I was in all the streets at the same time. That I stole all the images and locked time up. (...) I am asking myself, how come I decided to film with you? And who are we going to show the images to? Against whom are we fighting? Before it was clear to me, I was fighting to be free. (...) I feel naked. Whom are we going to show the images to?”. Hamido’s reflexivity takes the form of a deep interest in the self in dialogue with the other; what guides Hamido’s gaze is not so much reality or one’s experience of reality but on the shared experience of the real. Hamido’s gaze almost suggests that reality itself is an act of co-creation; the self alone does not exist, it becomes an identity only in relation to the other. Likewise, images are made in co-creation with everyone and everything involved in the making of the film. Again, the prerequisite for this approach is an attitude of attentive and receptive listening towards all entities and events involved. Hamido highlighted the centrality of the shared experience in her filmmaking when asked about the relevancy of the film by Zimmerman: “When I started making the film it felt very urgent; I just felt I had to document what I was witnessing and living at the time. There are many layers to the film and one is the Palestinian struggle; that’s where Jazz (Al Jazzar) comes from, his family comes from Acca. (...). The film is about that and about our lived experience in relation to that because I don’t think our situation is really separated from what happened in the past. I was really interested in myself and understanding our lived experience”.<sup>68</sup> In this respect, the film shows that giving a voice to the filmed witness/collaborator is not only compatible with portraying the author’s voice; the two processes of expression are intertwined, making the film a multilayered dialogue that is affected by dynamic shifts of perspectives. At the same time, *On Akka’s Shore* shows that an artistic collaboration as both performance and documentation of

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<sup>67</sup> Conversation between Andrea Luka Zimmerman and Umama Hamido, available on the Whitechapel Gallery’s youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuMvnd50ZxI>. Last accessed: February 2025.

<sup>68</sup> Conversation between Andrea Luka Zimmerman and Umama Hamido, available on the Whitechapel Gallery’s youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuMvnd50ZxI>. Last accessed: February 2025.

an open and shared process can be compatible with an approach in which the filmmaker is the author of the film, the one who has the last word on the final form of the work. As Hamido writes about the process of filming and then watching the materials: “Being on the ground and behind the camera, being present in the event itself, is so different from watching and listening to it in front of a screen. A distance has been formed by then, between the I and the subject, and one transitions from a participant to a witness and an observer. Though one never stops being one – it’s just that retreating from the event changes our position and perspective on it. It was difficult to go through this transition at first, but soon after, the listening process became a whole new world; it’s as if you are entering deeper and deeper into your subject. It’s a meditation in itself.” (Hannigsen and Joffrè, 2022, p 88).

In this short analysis of *On Akka’s Shore* (2018), we have attempted to show how multiple dimensions of meaning, perspectives and aspects of the real not only coexist but also cocreate the filmic form. Seeing a documentary image “through the eye” implies considering its many layers and their intricate dialogues as they are revealed not only in the film’s themes, but also structurally and visually. Moreover, documentary images are dynamic objects that evolve with time, making it close to an impossible task to read all their layers at any one single point in time. To conclude, *On Akka’s Shore* is an evocative audio-visual journey that explores the performative, reflexive and transitional dimensions of documentary images not only thematically but also structurally and visually. The author’s opportunity to transform a spontaneous encounter and a deeply personal vision into a highly experimental film was possible probably because the film was produced outside of traditional film production systems and their tight budget and time constrictions and rules, breaking free from thematic and formal conventions and obligations that can at times translate to visual cages for both authors and spectators.

## 9. Lyrical accounts. *The Mechanics of Fluids* (2022)

The French documentary film *The Mechanics of Fluids* (*La Mécanique des Fluides*, 2022) by Gala Hernández López is an authorial quest in the dark depths of the internet to find out why a Reddit user that went under the pseudonym of Anathematic Anarchist published his last letter online and titled it “America is responsible for my death” before committing suicide. Anathematic Anarchist self-identified as an *incel*, a portmanteau word of “involuntary celibate”. The term refers to a mostly online subculture of diverse people, but mostly white, male and heterosexual, who build their identity around their perceived failure to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one, and who typically blame, objectify and denigrate women and girls as a result. Exploring the psychological, cultural, and societal factors that contribute to the phenomenon of incels, *The The Mechanics of Fluids* won a César Award as Best Documentary Short Film in 2024 and was screened at several international film festivals. The film delves deep into the emotional states of loneliness, alienation, and social isolation that the internet can fuel in users as it traces how users within certain online spaces may develop a dangerous radicalisation of their worldviews. Making large use of “desktop footage”, that is images that are created by simply recording a computer’s screen, the film is highly experimental in its visuals and form. However, it is the author's reflexive perspective and compassionate positioning towards incels that make the film most innovative, as we argue below.

Originally coined by a Canadian student known online as Alana to describe people suffering from loneliness and social isolation, the term “incel” was not associated with any specific gender or ideology (Sparks, Zidenberg, and Olver, 2022).<sup>69</sup> Over time, the term was adopted by specific online communities and subcultures, where the focus shifted toward the grievances of heterosexual men and their misogynistic tendencies. Today, discussions in incel forums are often characterised by anti-feminism, misogyny, misanthropy, nihilism, self-pity, self-loathing, racism, rape culture, sexual objectification, the view of sex as an entitlement, and the approval of both sexual and non-sexual violence against women. Because of this, to some, incel culture represents the contemporary shape of male supremacists’ ideology. As

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<sup>69</sup> Please note that the adjective celibate in English can be applied to both males and females.

Costello, Rolon, and Thomas have highlighted, when compared to non-incels, most incels show signs of a greater tendency for interpersonal victimhood, higher levels of depression, anxiety and loneliness, and lower levels of life satisfaction (Costello, Rolon, Thomas et al., 2022); furthermore, they are associated with high rates of autism spectrum disorder, low attachment security, and a lack of social support (Sparks, Zidenberg, and Olver, 2022).

Instead of focusing on statistics regarding incels, the work of Hernández López operates a surgical dissection of the emotional dynamics that lead to the emergence of self-harming behaviours amongst them. The director's operation is successful because of her deep sensitivity towards incels' fragilities, mirrored by her willingness to self-compassionately listen to her own vulnerabilities. The film begins with a male voice over a black screen welcoming users to a live stream about his depressing and solitary life as a member of the "robot society" in which people get up, work, make money, consume and die; then, as the camera rolls, he takes the tape off the camera's lens and a boy appears in the video; with his face hidden by a scarf, he shows his hand to the camera while explaining that he bites it harshly. The sequence is followed by the film's credit and title, and then, over images of what seem to be an enlargement of a digital icon on a computer's screen, we hear the director's voice: "Dear Anathematic Anarchist, we don't know each other, I don't know your name, what you look like or where you live (...). In 2017 you founded a forum on Reddit, /Braincels which had 17,000 users; on the forum's description, you wrote: "Welcome to /Braincels. If you want a fun, energizing and thought-provoking atmosphere for incel culture you've come to the right place". (...) When I found it I thought I was indeed in the right place. "I am also an incel" I thought. I am single against my will. I, too, long for love but can't find it." (from the film's voice-over, author's translation).<sup>70</sup>

The film's voice-over is Hernandez López's response to Anathematic Anarchist's suicide letter; it reflects the author's affinity towards the late incel, whom she later affectionately calls "Anathematic". Their impossible friendship becomes the premise of a journey of self-discovery, as well as of an investigation towards the insecurities of a generation. As the director's notes about the film state: "*The Mechanics of Fluids* is an attempt to find answers to his words. A virtual drift on the Internet in search of his digital traces that ends up being an inner journey between two connected solitudes".<sup>71</sup> When asked to expand on this, Fernandez Lopez said that incels' emotional states: "resonated with me in an unexpected way, because

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<sup>70</sup> Freely translated by the author from the voice-over in French, the film's original language.

<sup>71</sup> From the director's webpage: <https://www.galahernandez.com/en/proyectos/fluids-mechanics/>.

I've also often found myself terribly alone behind the screen of my cell phone, obsessed by its illusion of connectivity and sociability. "(Elliott, 2024).

Hernández López's empathic listening position towards her subject is characterised by openness and attunement; in an emblematic sequence of the film, as a male voice (possibly created by an artificial intelligence) reads Anathematic's suicide letter, the director's voice joins in the reading, and then concludes: "Your letter made me cry". In another crucial sequences that display the director's deep attunement with the late incel's feeling of loneliness, Hernández López shares with Anathematic a recurring dream in which she is left alone on an island destined to be flooded in the near future; as she watches the rescuing boat take the sea and contemplates her grim destiny, she wonders if Anathematic made it onboard. Interestingly, this is one of the few sequences in the film that does not feel like a desktop search but more like a virtual reality project set in an apocalyptic alternate world. As these sequences show, the film relates to the emotional pain of incels without judgments; instead, the director's enquiring gaze seeks to understand their world from an insider's perspective. In a short section of the film for instance, the author uses incels' jargon words such as "Stacey", "Becky" and "Chad", terms that refer to attractive and sexually active women, less attractive sexually active women, and attractive sexually active men, respectively. In another memorable sequence, Hernández López edits a male voice reading two disturbing poems about incels' views of women and men by Anathematic Anarchist over violent video-game images of shootings, followed by a montage of web videos showing a series of female sleep streamers (people streaming live videos of themselves sleeping to be watched by others online). Images expand on the words of Anathematic Anarchist rather than commenting on them, creating his hypothetical but credible world and making it visible to the audience. The director's empathy towards the pain of incels, however, does not obfuscate the clarity of her point of view on their dangerous behaviours. As her voice-over states in another section of the film: "Many of you detest women of a corrosive, acidic hatred; you share theories that allow you to explain reality through a singular prism; (...) In your tragedy there are villains and you, the innocent victims" (from the film's voice-over, author's translation).

As these sequences show, Hernández López's attuned and yet balanced dialogue with incels is carried out through the voice-over as much as through the images in the film, which are in search of ways to represent how the internet feels to avid and addicted users. In the director's words: "I wanted the film's experience to resemble my own as an Internet user: the constant leap between contents that are often opaquely linked, the disruption of notifications, the leap between different applications and platforms, between very heterogeneous image regimes and

texts, numbers, icons, gifs. All this semiotic density of the internet experience sometimes seems to me close to a hypnotic trance, overflowing and overwhelming because of the extension of the “domain of struggle” (to quote an incel writer I know). The desire to reproduce this experience of interminable virtual drift is at the root of the discursive wandering you feel in the film.” (Elliott, 2024).

The director’s one-to-one constructed relationship with *Anathematic* offers the opportunity to investigate related aspects of contemporary culture, such as the connections between social media, incels, historical misogyny, computational capitalism and online dating. For example, *Anathematic Anarchist’s* poems evoke incels’ obsession with their doomed physical appearance, which they believe prevents them from achieving romantic success. The incels’ poems allow the director to start a tangential exploration of the dynamics of online dating, which in turn reveal much more than expected. Firstly, Hernández López shares in the voice-over that most popular dating sites like Tinder use an internal “index of attractiveness”, which is obscured to users, to determine how visible a profile is to others on the site, which sets their chances of “making matches”, a prerequisite to unlocking the chat feature, which users can use to communicate with other users on these platforms. Secondly, the film uncovers how, due to the large number of male users on online dating platforms, Tinder’s algorithm penalises men who opt not to pay the subscription and choose the free version of the platform by making them less visible to other users. This means that intimate aspects of people’s lives, such as their dating chances, are dystopically manipulated by virtual algorithms whose principal goal is to maximise profit. Thirdly, the author questions the role of these algorithmic mechanisms in breeding incels ideologies; as she says in the voice-over, referring to *Anathematic Anarchist*: “Your existence is a collective failure. (...) You are twisted, terrifying, extreme specters; yet so human, so fragile, and so real; the consequences of the emotional misery of a broken system, responsible for a million deaths; among them, perhaps, yours.” (from the film’s voice-over, author’s translation). In delegating how we meet and date people to online platforms, we largely ignore the ways in which capitalism sneaks behind apparently neutral, objective, non-biased computer functions.

In exploring these mechanisms, the film opens a reflection on images as placeholders for humans. On dating platforms and social media apps alike, the focus is on interacting with pictures rather than with actual people. As the film’s title hints, no matter how multidimensional, images simplify the complexity of reality just like the internet. The title *The The Mechanics of Fluids* draws from fluid mechanics, a branch of physics that studies the unpredictable movement of fluids. To better understand fluids’ behavior, physicists

introduced the concept of mechanics, a framework that simplifies the complexity of their motion into more manageable and controllable models. Similarly, in dating apps human beings are reduced to curated digital profiles composed of selected or manipulated photos, usernames, and other fragments of an often fictional identity. While digital capitalism seeks to quantify and control aspects of human connection, love remains fluid, unpredictable, and resistant to such constraints. In the same way, documentary films are a simplified representation of the real, as they show selected portions of reality as seen through a constructed, subjective lens. The film's ending section opens with the desktop images of an interactive and dialogical chat between the director and an artificial intelligence; Hernández López asks the artificial intelligence's chatbot if, from the place where it stands, looking out at the whole internet, Anathematic Anarchist can be found anywhere; the artificial intelligence responds that yes, it is in touch with Anathematic, and that any messages will be delivered to him; in this final chapter of the film, the director hints at the uncanny possibilities of the internet as a volatile place to hide information, and as a virtual and unsettling space where the ineffable permanency of data- the virtual correspondence of human immortality- is coupled with an ungraspable fickleness.

In conclusion, *The The Mechanics of Fluids* by Gala Hernández López delves into the complex universe of incels and the emotional dynamics underlying their experiences with a uniquely balanced combination of sensitivity and rigor, while also exploring filmmaking as a means to represent how the internet feels to users. The film's many layers successfully show both a deeply personal and intimate reflection and a sharp critique of the socio-cultural and technological structures that fuel isolation and radicalisation, achieving a multifaceted visual synthesis of an empathic gaze towards incels, a condemnation of their toxic ideologies, a drive to represent a journey of self-compassion and self-discovery, and the desire to understand the role of images in shaping contemporary society. Through an experimental visual language and a fluid narrative, the film sheds light on the role of technology and digital capitalism in defining humans and their the modalities of interactions with the world. With its innovative approach, *The Mechanics of Fluids* is an invitation for a dialogue that does not end with it. Preceding the only image that feels real in the whole film- a short, crepuscular shot of the sea- the director's voice-over's final words state: "These images will remain. (...) And in this correspondence of words, images and sounds thrown into the sea, perhaps a conversation, a transformation will be forged. Perhaps the possibility of a remedy will arise. What do you think? Will there ever be a final image?"

**Connecting synchronicities.**

**Attuning to the real**

## 10. Synchronic framing. *San Clemente* (1980)

*San Clemente* (1980) is an Italian-French feature-length documentary film by Raymond Depardon and Sophie Ristelhueber filmed in the San Clemente Psychiatric Hospital in Venice, Italy. Depardon curated the cinematography, while Ristelhueber recorded the direct sound. Known for its raw and unflinching portrayal of life within the institution, showing the interactions between patients, staff, family visits, and the environment itself, this landmark film provides an intimate and observational look inside a psychiatric hospital located on the island of San Clemente, near Venice, Italy. A photojournalist since the early 1960s, Depardon captured major global events with a sharp, observational style, earning recognition for his coverage of wars, political upheavals, and cultural stories. Increasingly disenchanted with the constraints of corporate photojournalism, in the late 1970s, Depardon's focus began to shift as he explored longer-term projects that delved deeper into social and personal themes; his work during this period reflected a desire to push the boundaries of visual storytelling, blending his photoreporting roots with a more introspective and experimental approach to both photography and film (O'Rawe, 2019). From 1977 to 1982 Depardon turned his gaze to Italian psychiatric hospitals, starting from a photojournalistic assignment at the San Giovanni hospital of Trieste, and moving to various others in Venice, Turin, Arezzo, and Naples, photographing everyday life in the asylums, and hospital psychiatric wards.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Italy was undergoing a groundbreaking transformation in mental health care, led by the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia. The period marked the dismantling of traditional psychiatric asylums, long criticized for their inhumane conditions, neglect, and oppressive treatment of patients. Basaglia's efforts culminated in the passage of Law 180 in 1978, also known as the "Basaglia Law", which mandated the closure of psychiatric hospitals and the gradual replacement of institutional care with community-based services. This reform emerged as part of a broader movement advocating for civil rights and social justice, rejecting the isolation and stigmatization of individuals with mental illnesses. Basaglia and his colleagues emphasized the dignity and autonomy of patients, focusing on

deinstitutionalization, therapeutic communities, and integrating mental health care into broader social and medical networks. The reform faced significant resistance from conservative elements within the medical community and political system, as well as logistical challenges in implementing alternative care models. However, it became a global milestone, inspiring similar reforms worldwide and rethinking the relationship between mental health, society, and human rights. *San Clemente* is the result of both Depardon's new artistic direction, and his visual journey through psychiatric hospitals in Italy. In addition to the film, Depardon published a series of photographs in an exhibition catalogue in 1984, also titled *San Clemente* (Depardon, 1984), and then the photographic book *Manicomio: secluded madness*, thirty years later (Depardon, 2014).

### **Filmic approach and intentions**

Depardon and Ristelhueber employed a *cinéma vérité* style of aesthetics, meaning there is no external narration or overt intervention. As much as they attune to the hospital's patients, as we argue below, the filmmakers also tune in with the space, which in the film, feels like they are embedded with it; as Merleau-Ponty said, the space "is no longer the one described in *La Dioptrique*, a network of relations between objects, as it would be seen by a witness to my vision or by a geometer reconstructing it from above. Rather, it is a space considered from myself as the point or zero degree of spatiality. And I do not see it from its outer shell; I live it from within, I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me." (Merleau-Ponty, 1989 p. 42 , author's translation ).<sup>72</sup> The opening sequence of *San Clemente* is one of the film's most emblematic moments that encapsulates their overall approach in the film. It begins by showing at the centre of the frame an elegantly dressed elderly woman standing with her back facing the camera in front of a somewhat imposing entryway. The handheld camera stands in front of her back, less than a couple of metres away; it hesitates as she stands in front of what appears to be a significant threshold, that demands a moment of reflection before being crossed. The lady is wearing a long wool coat, black heels and a black handbag; her hair looks coiffed; she stands up with the hands on her hips in a power position,

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<sup>72</sup> Translated from: "Lo spazio allora non è più quello di cui parla la *Dioptrique*, un reticolo di relazioni fra gli oggetti, come lo vedrebbe un testimone della mia visione, o un geometra che la ricostruisse sorvolandola, ma è uno spazio considerato a partire da me come punto o grado zero della spazialità. E non lo vedo secondo il suo involucro esteriore, lo vivo dall'interno, vi sono inglobato. Dopotutto il mondo è intorno a me, non di fronte a me." (Merleau-Ponty, 1989 p. 42).

and she walks around with a straight back and a graceful portament, looking sophisticated and regal. As she knocks at the door, a female doctor followed by another lady let her in. Until now, being familiar with the film's synopsis, the viewer probably assumed she was a wealthy visitor to San Clemente mental health facility.<sup>73</sup> Then the camera follows the lady down a hallway with a couple more people; one is sitting on a chair, rocking herself back and forward; the camera is behind the lady as she goes through a second entrance into a dormitory hall with several cots. The bare interior design of the room, the white and ironed sheets, the minimalistic iron bed frames with a chair in front of each bed depict an unmistakable τόπος: we are in a mental health hospital. What is the lady doing in the heart of this facility, mingling with patients unattended? Should she not be escorted by a doctor if she is visiting a family member or friend? We immediately wonder if the lady is indeed a visitor or if she is in fact a patient. The woman, still wearing her wool coat, moves around the room with confidence, placing her handbag on one of the beds as if deeply familiar with the space and its furnishings. This simple gesture reveals that she is a patient at San Clemente. At this point, our perception of her, our *way of seeing*, might undergo a sharp shift: now that we know she resides in a psychiatric institution, will we view her with judgment or pity? Depardon and Ristelhueber frame the opening sequence to play with the ambiguity of the woman's identity—not so much to explore the thin line between sanity and insanity, but to confront the viewer with their own assumptions. They prompt us to reflect on how easily preconceived notions might creep into our gaze. Whether or not we initially judged the woman, her revealed identity likely stirs a mix of curiosity, apprehension, and discomfort. In this remarkable opening sequence, the filmmakers compel us to recognize how differently we respond to someone labeled as mentally ill, often without questioning or revising our judgments. By placing this shot before the title cartel, they challenge the viewer to observe the person in the images with neutrality—horizontally, without judgement or a distorting emotional drive.

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<sup>73</sup> Alternatively, a viewer unfamiliar with the film might interpret the opening scene as a simple moment: a woman waiting for someone to open the door of an unidentified building. The film begins with a written card stating: "*Nous remercions la province de Venise, qui dès 1977, nous permit la réalisation du travail photographique puis en février de 1982 le tournage de ce film*" ("We thank the province of Venice, which, starting in 1977, allowed us to carry out the photographic work and then, in February 1982, the filming of this film"). The filmmakers intentionally provide only minimal context, revealing just vague references to the location—the province of Venice—and the timeline, spanning from 1977 to 1982.

The filmmakers' driving purpose in making *San Clemente* is precisely this: to cultivate a more compassionate and unprejudiced gaze so as to protect the dignity of the hospital's patients. The need for such a purpose becomes even clearer shortly after, when a person in a white medical gown enters the frame, confronting the filmmakers and exclaiming with an indignant tone: "Chi vi ha autorizzato? Questo è un reparto, ci sono i malati, vi dovrete vergognare. Fuori da qui" ("Who gave you permission to film? This is a hospital ward with patients, you should be ashamed of yourselves. Get out"). The doctor's abrupt interruption dispels any lingering doubt about whether the documentary was scripted or staged. The film crew offers no resistance as the doctor firmly ejects them from the building, slamming the door loudly behind them. The sequence fades to black, followed by two still frames depicting the imposing psychiatric hospital on the island of San Clemente, separated by the title cartel. The facility dominates the tiny island by occupying most of its surface. Its fortress-like structure makes it look more like an impenetrable prison than a care facility. These visuals underline how San Clemente is both physically and metaphorically separated from the world of the sane; geographically cut off from the mainland and enclosed by high walls, the facility is presented as a place closed to the public, where contact with the outside is unwelcome. The reaction of the doctor highlights that the patients are not meant to be seen, much less filmed, and anyone attempting to do so is made to feel a sense of shame, emphasising the social and physical barriers that isolate the patients, and reinforcing the institution's role as a space of exclusion. This sense of separation between the patients and the outside world is reinforced in the sequence immediately after, a montage of dialogues between some of the patients' relatives and the medical staff during a meeting at the hospital, that show how the patients are viewed by both. On the one hand, visitors and doctors show some attunement to the practical needs of residents, for example by expressing concern about the shortage of staff; on the other hand, they hopelessly refer to them as being "incurable".

### **Filmic telepathy and openness to synchronicities**

The filmmakers propose their own way of seeing and relating to the residents of San Clemente in the central body of the film, which takes shape through a series of observational and moving encounters with some of the patients both on a one-on-one basis, and in group settings. Depardon's usual method of disappearing like a chameleon in the landscape doesn't work in the facility; here, the camera has become an active part of the film as the inmates

interact with it through a plethora of emotional states, from aggression to affection. When filming an ensemble, the camera gracefully shifts from one person to another, following their movements as if drawn by an invisible thread that connects the individuals and their surroundings. At times, the camera lingers on empty spaces or seemingly insignificant corners of the hospital. However, these moments are far from accidental; they are not simply rough cuts retained in the final cut to preserve the language of continuous shots. Instead, they form part of a deliberate framing style that fosters a “feeling of being there”, as Richard Leacock had described it (Leacock, 2011), creating the illusion of walking alongside the residents with a wandering, curious eye. Edgar Morin explained this uncanny connection between the camera and reality when discussing the making of *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960) in *Chronicle of a Film* using the word “telepathy”: “In this type of filming, the framing must follow the event. In ordinary films the event is circumscribed by a pre-established frame composition. Here, however, everything depends on instinct, on a sort of telepathic communication that is established between the cameraman and the scene. It is the cameraman’s responsibility to capture the significant face, which is not necessarily the speaker’s face.” (Morin, 2003, p. 238). This telepathic connection between the camera and the unfolding reality in *San Clemente* allows the filmmakers to offer a more intuitive, fluid experience, placing the viewer in close, unscripted proximity to the lives of the patients. In one of the sequence shots, a patient stands in the courtyard of the facility while smoking and he speaks in Venetian dialect directly to the filmmakers, who remain silent outside the frame, listening attentively to his words, gestures, and presence in front of the camera. His speech does not seem to follow a logical structure but the scene is imbued with emotional depth and meaning. After an initial moment of seeking attunement, the filmmakers seem to begin to grasp the man’s emotional state. The camera observes the man horizontally, maintaining a listening distance that is close enough to attune the framing’s subtle adjustments to the fluid movements of his gestures; the framing follows his restless pacing, capturing his frustration when he begins to walk away from the camera, while also lovingly following him and pause when it senses he is about to say something else. These camera movements reflect a typical conversational ritual that might occur between close friends. There is a process of listening and understanding that transcends words, establishing a deeper connection based on empathy and shared presence. Both the physical and emotional presence of the filmmakers is palpable—not only to the patient, but also to the viewer. The man often looks directly into the

camera, as if he is attempting to communicate with the filmmakers' world (or perhaps with the audience) in a direct, intimate way. Although the filmmakers do not understand his language and logic, the camera moves in sync with him, as if it is searching for a way to listen more deeply. Similarly, in another striking sequence, the camera frames a man sitting on a bench, absorbed in listening to a portable radio. The themes of listening and attunement return here in a literal and powerful way. As he changes stations, a song captures his attention, evoking emotions so intense that he lowers his head onto the table and begins to weep, overcome with sorrow. The camera moves closer to him almost imperceptibly, its soft, fluid motion mirroring the depth of his grief. Moments later, with a sudden sense of resolve, the man rises, as though drawing strength from within. With determination, he changes the station again, abruptly ending his sadness. The camera follows the swift, deliberate movements of his arms, its framing becoming more dynamic as it aligns with his renewed energy. The patience with which the camera observes his actions and body language—attuned to his shifting emotional states—enables the viewer to see him not as a patient in a psychiatric hospital, but simply as a man moved by a song, perhaps one tied to memories of his youth. In this moment, the boundaries dissolve: the man's humanity takes center stage, and the context of the institution fades. This exemplifies the Depardon-Ristelhueber effect, which works as an antidote to judgment, inviting the viewer to see without prejudice and to connect with the subjects on a deeply human level.

### **A benevolent gaze**

Depardon began photographing the wards almost instinctively, without a formal permission, after a number of visits. As he recalls: "One day, I followed this group coming out of the canteen. What was it about the patients that struck me: the way they looked, the clothes they wore, the way they walked? I was drawn to them. I found myself in a very old "reparto;" the door of the ward closed behind me, there wasn't a nurse in sight. With the noise and the decrepitude of the place, I confess that for a moment I took fright. I started taking photographs, very quietly. I went back there every day. I spent all my time on this ward. No one ever asked me anything. One afternoon, I heard someone shouting and pushed open a door. I found myself face to face with this man in a cage. I had misgivings about photographing him. I asked a nurse why he was given this particular treatment; he told me the man was violent and a danger, especially to himself. Franco Basaglia invited me to a fine restaurant in Trieste. I thought he was going to chide me for photographing this ward of

‘chronic’ patients. He made no mention of it; he talked about other things. When the dinner was over, I confessed. He reassured me immediately: “You’ll photograph patients here who you won’t see anywhere else, but it’s exactly the same in France and America. The psychiatric hospital made them that way; now it’s too late, there’s nothing else I can do for them.” Take your photographs,” he added, “otherwise people won’t believe us.” (Depardon, 2014, p. 10). In a more recent interview for the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, Depardon recalls the importance of Basaglia’s words for him: “There are certain situations like psychiatric hospitals where it is very difficult to take a good picture without coming across as aggressive. I had an extraordinary encounter with basaglia which was pivotal for me because I was feeling guilty, I was feeling a voyeur, a reporter, and he freed me from these feelings.” (Depardon, 2021).

We have looked at how Depardon’s film and photographic work depicts the lives of mentally fragile, vulnerable individuals subject to questionable measures of care in a closed institution. Depardon’s work undoubtedly contributed to divulging awareness around the need for a profound transformation of psychiatric facilities. But what about the voyeuristic tendencies of the gaze? According to the hospital doctor who dismisses Depardon and Ristelhueber from San Clemente at the beginning of the film, the authors should have felt shame when filming ill patients. The human emotion of shame has been studied in relation to social change, and it was found that, while at the individual level it is mostly a damaging emotion, at the collective level it can both be beneficial and detrimental for communities.<sup>74</sup> On one hand, shame can motivate prosocial behaviours (Brown et al., 2008); on the other, it can provoke in-group animosity and punishment (Piff et al., 2012). When unethical behaviour is normalised in a group, feelings of shame are less likely to influence unethical conducts; however, when unethical behaviour is abnormal, we might expect transgressions to invoke group self-questioning and shame (Murphy and Kiffin-Petersen, 2017). For Brown, feeling shame means putting up an emotional armour that prevents human beings from accessing their vulnerability, which is where other important resources reside, such as courage, innovation, compassion, and the capacity to understand others and oneself, the necessary requirements to

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<sup>74</sup> One of the examples that Brown gives in her talks to explain how shame gets in the way of positive individual improvements explains why some American doctors refuse to comply with the mandatory compilation of checklists during medical procedures- doing so makes them feel and appear incapable of recalling the right sequence of actions they should take; shame-prone individuals respond more intensely to incidents (real and imaginative) of personal failure, and hiding failure is closely aligned with a self-perception of inadequacy. See more on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jtZdSRst94>. Last accessed: December 2024.

develop openness towards change (Brown, 2006). Accordingly, the feelings of shame that the doctor of San Clemente invokes as a reason not to film psychiatric patients, could equally be invoked as a reason to film them. Some reinforce this by arguing that to regulate shame in shame-prone individuals, who hold a risk factor for the onset and recurrence of some mental health disorders, perspective taking coupled with positive reappraisal show positive results (Davis et al., 2020). In other words, a benevolent witness is beneficial to regulate shame, and this in turns has a positive effect on the openness to change.

As the analysis of the sequences above suggest, Depardon and Ristelhueber show a deep attunement to San Clemente and the people that inhabit it through their unique way of framing, which also reveals their point of view and their benevolent, non-judgemental, open relationship to both San Clemente and image-making in general. In Depardon's view, images are the result of a dynamic dialogue that blurs the boundaries between filmmaker and the real: "I go to encounter the image, and the image comes toward me." (Depardon in Naggar, 2005, p. 41). This way of framing develops through handheld long takes. The sequence shot is undoubtedly Depardon's favourite form in his visual approach; with it, the director can open his gaze to the unexpected, while following his telepathic intuition. This is made possible thanks to a patient gaze that takes the time to explore what is normally underlooked in the mundane. As he explained during his 2012 masterclass at Festival dei Popoli: "I love filming dead time. When I shoot something where nothing happens, and time feels weak and uninteresting [...]. Then, at a certain moment, a small miracle occurs. I don't know what it is. Maybe just a tiny thing, but after editing, it gives the image an incredible strength. [...] This is truly the mystery of cinema." (Depardon in Ticozzi, 2022, author's translation).<sup>75</sup> This careful yet curious approach contrasts greatly with the reporter's gaze that typically moves in search of a quick, dramatic and memorable shot. Their openness to synchronicities keeps the authors of *San Clemente* from adopting a "clinical gaze", or the gaze that tends to objectifying the body of the patient as if it were separate and apart from their identity and story, which was conceptualised by Michel Foucault in 1963. In Faucault's view, the clinical, calculating gaze of modern medicine stems from the birth of the clinic- a rigid discursive structure that first

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<sup>75</sup> Translated from: "Amo filmare i tempi morti. Quando faccio qualcosa dove non succede nulla, e il tempo è debole e senza interesse [...]. Poi a un certo momento avviene un piccolo miracolo. Non so cosa. Forse una cosa piccola così, ma che dopo il montaggio dà all'immagine una forza incredibile. [...] Questo è veramente il mistero del cinema" (Depardon in Ticozzi, 2022).

and foremost is aimed at establishing a hierarchy of power and knowledge (Foucault, 2003);<sup>76</sup> to condense his description of the clinical gaze: “ a purified purifying gaze; which freed from darkness, dissipates darkness.” (Foucault, 2003, p. 63).<sup>77</sup>

Far from adopting a clinical gaze, the authors of *San Clemente* also avoid to fall in the somewhat opposite direction and embrace what Szymanski describes in relation to films on mental health as “the activist gaze” (Szymanski, 2019, p. 24) . For Szymanski, who frames this concepts within the context of canadian film production, the activist modality is set to: “deploy aesthetic forms that challenge the primacy of psychiatry’s clinical gaze” producing “artefacts of noncompliance to the institutional impetus toward biological reductionism(...); what these films suggest is that mental health activism can become a therapeutic practice in its own right—a therapeutic activism—that brings to the fore the existential qualities of the experience of being unwell and the process of trying to get better.” (Szymanski, 2019, p. 25)<sup>78</sup>. If Depadron and Ristelhueber wanted to expose the mainstream psychiatric approach of the time, they would have focussed more extensively and selectively on documenting the possible routine degradation, the administrative neglect, or any form of mistreatment or even

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<sup>76</sup> As foucault explains: “The clinic—constantly praised for its empiricism, the modesty of its attention, and the care with which it silently lets things surface to the observing [medical] gaze without disturbing them with discourse—owes its real importance to the fact that it is a reorganisation-in-depth, not only of medical discourse, but of the very possibility of a discourse about disease.” (Foucault, 2003, p. 16)

<sup>77</sup> As Foucault explains: “The idea of a transparent, undivided domain, exposed from top to bottom to a gaze armed nonetheless with its privileges and qualifications, dissipated its own difficulties in the powers accorded to liberty: in liberty, disease was to formulate of itself an unchanging truth, offered, undisturbed, to the doctor's gaze; and society, medically invested, instructed, and supervised, would, by that very fact, free itself from disease. The great myth of the free gaze, which, in its fidelity to discovery, receives the virtue to destroy; a purified purifying gaze; which freed from darkness, dissipates darkness. The cosmological values implicit in the Enlightenment are still at work here. The medical gaze, whose powers were beginning to be recognized, had not yet been given its technological structure in the clinical organisation; it was only one segment of the dialectic of the Lumieres transported into the doctor's eye. For reasons that are bound up with the history of modern man, the clinic was to remain, in the opinion of most thinkers, more closely related to the themes of light and liberty which, in fact, had evaded it than to the discursive structure in which, in fact, it originated. It is often thought that the clinic originated in that free garden where, by common consent, doctor and patient met, where observation took place, innocent of theories, by the unaided brightness of the gaze, where, from master to disciple, experience was transmitted beneath the level of words. And to the advantage of a historical view that relates the fecundity of the clinic to a scientific, political, and economic liberalism, one forgets that for years it was the ideological theme that prevented the organisation of clinical medicine.” (Foucault, 2003, p. 63).

<sup>78</sup> Szymanski’s analysis is contingent on documentary films on mental health issues produced in Canada by the National Film Board (NFB) over the last four decades.

abuse of patients. Instead, their images focus on the relational spaces that their presence can open, and to capture these synchronic encounters. In doing so, their gaze manifests as more benevolent than inquisitive. To explore this, consider *San Clemente* in comparison with Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1959), another notable observational documentary film of the tradition of direct cinema that is equally interested in the inner workings of a psychiatric institution, the Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, and its inmate-patients. As opposed to Depardon, Wiseman's implacable eye documents how patients are kept in barren cells without bathing; how they are stripped naked in public, forced to eat, and other ways in which they suffer the consequences of the staff's indifference and bullying. Although *Titicut Follies* can evoke sentiments of deep indignation in the viewer, Wiseman's film is much more than immersive reporting, or activist filmmaking. Coming from a specific methodology and a set of choices regarding the author's positioning in the emotional, psychological, intellectual and social space of American institutions that is at the same time that of an insider, and outside space and time, Wiseman's investigative and critical way of seeing, which some described as tactless (Nichols, 1978), is both observational and non-neutral, as we further discuss in *Exotopic forms. Honouring the real*. Whereas *Titicut Follies* depicts the violation of dignity, Depardon and Ristelhueber frame, among other things, an emotional map to the inner worlds of psychiatric patients, which brings forth their humanity by showing their capacity to feel emotions like everyone else. Depardon's benevolent eye is not scared off by the dull moments, and continually remains attuned to the ways in which bodies, gestures, inanimate objects and the environments of the hospital synchronically engage in a sort of spatial dance with each other. When the camera pauses on an individual, it focuses on filming the other horizontally, with curiosity and compassion. In addition to the vast use of handheld long takes, this attunement takes visible consistency through the sound design, which weaves together a haunting mix of ambient sounds—such as snippets of radio music and tv—alongside environmental noises like footsteps, creaking doors, and scattered conversations, juxtaposed with moments of silence. This auditory landscape complements the visuals of restless figures engaged in repetitive actions: pacing the corridors, wandering in circles, dancing with a mechanical rhythm, or sitting in complete stillness. Depardon's open, synchronic way of framing the hospital captures all the sounds, all the human and nonhuman presences, and all the spaces, producing an artistic yet trustworthy spatial and human cartography of the place.

## Conclusions

Raymond Depardon and Sophie Ristelhueber achieve a profound attunement to their subjects in *San Clemente*, a feat that may appear, to an untrained observer, as the result of serendipitous events unfolding naturally before the camera. However, as this analysis has attempted to show, this attunement is not the product of mere chance but of their mastery of the art of filming reality. At this level of expertise, the filmmakers' ability to resonate with the individuals and spaces they depict arises from intuitive responses cultivated through years of disciplined practice. This process mirrors the Zen principle: "draw bamboo for ten years, become bamboo, then forget all about bamboo when you are drawing it." Similarly, *San Clemente* emerges from a profound dedication to understanding the psychiatric hospital and its inhabitants—an immersion so complete that the filmmakers metaphorically "become" the space they are representing; by internalizing its patterns, its silences, and its human complexities, they transcend deliberate effort and start intuitively move in sync with its rhythm, allowing the act of filming to flow as an embodied practice. The resulting film exemplifies a progression from rigorous study to enactment to a state of spontaneous expression. In this progression, the boundaries between observer and observed dissolve, culminating in a cinematic work that is at once incisive and deeply human. The result is a film that is political but not ideological, compelling but not militant. Thanks to the authors' unpreparedness to the real but deep preparedness to the craft of making images of the real, the film creates a sense of discovery that is not artificial but genuine, which continuously reveal a dynamically changing, unpredictable, uncertain and multivergent real in a touching and subtly provocative way.

## 11. Synchronic montage. *Gli Anni* (2018)

*Gli Anni* (*The Years*), (2018) is a short film by Documentary filmmaker and editor Sara Fgaier. The film won several relevant awards including a European Film Award for best short film in 2018. Fgaier's work is directly inspired by the homonymous novel *Les Années* (2008) by Nobel prize winner author Annie Ernaux. Ernaux, who won the prestigious Swedish award in 2022 for "the courage and clinical acuity with which she uncovers the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory" reflected through her work on the possibilities of the biography, or autofiction, both as a narrative device and as a research tool. Bridging private memories and imagination, Ernaux's work stands out for its sociological and autobiographical depth, offering a vivid portrayal of personal identity and social structures and making her writing both deeply personal and universally resonant. Her exploration of womanhood, class, and memory has had a profound influence on contemporary literature, cementing her status as a key author of our times. It is not a surprise that the intimate and yet political work of Ernaux met the interest of Sara Fgaier, who previously notably co-authored as editor and producer several groundbreaking experimental films such as award-winning *La Bocca del Lupo* (2009) and *Bella e Perduta* (2015) along with director Pietro Marcello. Both works blend archival footage, documentary images and fiction cinema to transform individual memories into universal cinematic narrations. In both films, the theme of love lost and found recurs. In *La bocca del Lupo*, it takes the shape of the distance love story between convicted felon Vincenzo Motta (Enzo) and transexual and ex-addict Mary Monaco, who meet in prison and continue to love each other through recorded tapes once Mary is released. In *Bella e Perduta* it is the intriguing, imaginative search of Pulcinella (Sergio Vitolo), a character from the Campanian tradition and an intermediary between the living and the dead, who has the mission of fulfilling the last wish of a humble Campanian shepherd, Tommaso Cestroni: to save a buffalo calf named Sarchiapone. Fgaier's directorial debut as a solo director, *Gli Anni* reimagines a story that explores once again the themes that are most dear to the author: love-stories, memory, and family relationships, and consecrate them through Fgaier's cherished medium: private cine amatoriale found footage of

family videos, shot with a super eight camera. As we discuss below, through a synchronic approach to editing, Fgaier is able to activate a unique process of transfiguration of the materials she works with.

### **The emergence of the authorial point of view from diverse materials**

The footage selected by Fgaier for *Gli Anni* shows scenes of family gatherings featuring mostly women<sup>79</sup>. The footage is edited carefully, almost giving the impression that it all belongs to the same family. With each passing scene, faces and places seem to recur, and the spectator is left with the impression that they have become familiar to them; at the same time, they evoke a sense of estrangement. A day at the beach, a joyful garden party with extended family, old photographs of couples, little children with the wind in their hair, the waterfalls, a day in the countryside. However the images do not simply portray womanhood. Five minutes into the film, during a short filmic segment showing a couple in love, the voice-over recites: “He did that. Her husband films them. He is always the one who films.” (Author’s translation). Even though it shows women, the voice-over establishes the presence of a male gaze behind the camera, filming women. As opposed to the female protagonist of the story that is defined through Fgaier’s subjective perspective and directorial decisions, and that reverberates in Ernaux’s memories, the male figure that films is undetermined and intangible. It does not have a voice - it only lives in the voice-memory of the women that were part of his life- nor a body, only a gaze. The narrative structure that Fgaier chooses for the film also aligns with a male presence that is somewhat oppressive. In the auditory story, the theme is the building of a female identity, which begins with a young girl discovering her desire and sexuality, falling in love, and getting married, only to eventually become dependent on a male figure who prevents her from expressing herself fully. Having gained wisdom through the years, the female protagonist decides to divorce the male figure, so as to return to her individual self and rediscover the same sense of freedom and thirst for the future she experienced as an adolescent.

The spectator is guided through the story by a voice-over, a delicate and timid feminine voice reading extracts from Ernaux’s novel, freely selected and rearranged; the voice of Fgaier herself. The work on sound design, which Fgaier carried on along with longtime collaborator

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<sup>79</sup> For the production of *Gli Anni*, Fgaier selected images of women from various collections of materials within the cinemathèque since a collection dedicated to women specifically did not exist (Mileto, 2021, p. 2).

and sound expert Riccardo Spagnol,<sup>80</sup> started from the ground zero of the silent archive footage and built a surreal atmosphere that takes the spectator to an oniric realm right from the film's opening soundtrack, a lullaby hummed by a female singer that seems to emanate from the beginning of time.<sup>81</sup> This track cradles the emotional essence of Fgaier's work, which on a more intellectual level emerges in the film's themes of womanhood, motherhood, grief, consolation, the passing of time, memories, dreams, and ghosts. As the spectators listens to the lullaby, they are accompanied into the hypnagogic state that connects waking with sleeping, a ritual that traditionally has been conducted by a female mother figure, soothing crying newborns as they shift from a safe state of wokeness to a threatening state of deep unconsciousness. In this state, the spectator is ready to dream along with the filmmaker, to see through the images and meet their own ghosts, just like Fgaier met hers through both Ernaux's words and the family movies of sardinian cine-amateurs.

The power struggle between the male gaze in the archive footage and the female perspective in the auditory material creates a destabilising feeling in the spectator. Unlike the borrowed images and words, the soundtrack of the film, which focuses on suscitating a specific ethereal and mostly sorrowful mood, seems to direct the spectator inside the defined personal emotional boundaries of Fgaier's inner world. Unlike images and words, which declare the presence of a male gaze, the soundtrack and the narrative structure embody Fgaier's point of view, that of a female subjectivity: a mother, a woman, a lover, whose desire is to regain control over her life. Through these the director regains control over the point of view in the film. Becoming progressively more apparent, the presence of the filmmaker gets visual as well when midway through the film, Fgaier inserts images of parts of her own body (her hands and fingers) that look like x-rays or photocopies, as well as a short sequence showing a series of objects meaningful to her: a glass ball, a locket, an antique brooch, and an incense stick in a triangular incense holder; the images, in black and white, are unsettling as they appear to be vintage footage, but some details betray their more recent making. The uncanny feeling is reinforced throughout the film by the use of special effects that create cracks that visually disrupt the images in various segments of the film, suggesting that the passing of

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<sup>80</sup> Riccardo Spagnol curated the sound of Pietro Marcello's films: *Il Passaggio della Linea* (2007), assistant director Sara Fgaier; *La Bocca del Lupo* (2009), Editor and assistant director Sara Fgaier; *9x10 Novanta- L'Umile Italia* (2014), co-director Sara Fgaier; and *Bella e Perduta* (2015) edited and co-produced by Sara Fgaier.

<sup>81</sup> The melody is a silent song performed by opera singer Cecilia Paoletti based on the popular theme of "*Mi votu e mi rivotu*". The melody returns later on in the film, this second time in a different arrangement derived from Vinicio Capossela's song *Pena dell'Alma*.

time deteriorates both the material evidence of past events such as family videos, as well as emotional traces like memories. Sound effects like ringing bells and a clock ticking reinforce a sense of time passing. The design of the cracks which are reminiscent of the mineral world also strengthen the matheric aspect of film.

### **Filmic transfiguration of found family videos through synchronic montage**

Fgaier finds the footage for her film in the collections of the Cagliari Cinetheque (Cineteca Sarda di Cagliari), a video library founded in 1966 in Sardinia that had been collecting family videos for seven years at the time of Fgaier's research. The filmic version of family photo albums, found footage of family videos open unique alleys in which a director is called to experiment artistically. Firstly, family images are originally produced precisely to preserve and cherish family memories. Secondly, the gaze behind such images is usually that of an insider- a family member. Thirdly, family images are typically made to be looked at by spectators who hold a special relationship with the people that are filmed- their children or their nephews. Because of this, family images carry a specific intimate quality, and this intimacy is reflected in the kind of memories they are supposed to maintain through time. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes reflects deeply on family photographs, focusing on how they evoke complex emotions and connect to the human sense of personal history. One of his key insights comes from analyzing a specific photograph of his mother, known by later scholars as the *Winter Garden Photograph*, as Barthes does not name it (Barthes, 2003, p. 69-72). The photo, which Barthes describes but does not reproduce, shows his mother as a young girl of about five years old, standing with her brother in a winter garden; it is the only image of his mother in which Barthes finds the truth of her being, conveyed mainly by her facial expression. As he writes of the other photographs of his mother that had left him unsatisfied: "According to the photographs, in some I recognised a region of the face, the particular relation of the nose to the forehead, the movement of her arms, her hands. I always recognised her only in fragments, which meant that her being escaped me, and so, entirely, she escaped me. It was not her, and yet it was no one else. I would have recognised her among thousands of women, and yet I did not 'find' her. I recognised her differentially, not essentially. The photograph forced me into a painful labor: striving toward the essence of her identity, I floundered among partially true images and therefore totally false ones." (Barthes, 2003, p. 67-68, author's translation).<sup>82</sup> The Winter Garden Photograph brings forth what

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<sup>82</sup> Translated from: "Secondo le foto, in certune riconoscevo una regione del volto, il tale rapporto del naso con la fronte, il movimento delle sue braccia, delle sue mani. Io la riconoscevo sempre e solo a

Barthes calls the “*punctum*”, the striking detail that evokes a deeply personal reaction, distinct from the “*studium*”, the more general, cultural, and aesthetic interpretation of a photograph (Barthes, 2003, p. 28); in relation to family images, the punctum is especially poignant because it is mediated by the viewer’s intimate connection to the subjects in the image. For Barthes, the Winter Garden Photograph becomes a means to mourn his late mother by reconnecting with his memory of her, and establish a new emotional starting point to build the future. The photograph does not simply show Barthes’ mother’s face, but also tells something about a time and a place, or, according to Benjamin, a culture. As Benjamin wrote: “In photography, the value of exhibition-ability increasingly replaces cultural value across the board. However, the latter does not retreat without resistance. It holds its last stronghold: the human face. It is no coincidence that portraiture was central to early photography. In the cult of remembrance for distant or deceased loved ones, the cultural value of the image finds its final refuge. In the fleeting expression of a human face, from the earliest photographs, the aura emanates for the last time. This is what gives them their melancholic and incomparable beauty.” (Benjamin, 2014, p. 14-15, author’s translation).<sup>83</sup>

The emotional and cultural drive to dig out the traces of an irrecoverable time with lost loved ones, places, gestures, and so on, to rebuild one’s identity is also what guides Fgaier’s film. At the beginning of her creative journey, Fgaier did not know the work of Ernaux; her vision was guided by an unrefined idea—a feeling that drove the research, linked to the recent experience of what Fgaier describes as “the painful loss of a very close friend” (Mileto, 2021). However, with the project for *Gli Anni*, Fgaier’s emotional excavation extends through multiple layers as the director works with the family movies of others. In order to communicate a cinematic story that is meaningful to her and that has the potential to resonate universally, the Sardinian family videos selected for the film must fit into Fgaier’s own artistic vision first, and then merge with the immaterial family videos that live in the minds of

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pezzi, vale a dire che il suo essere mi sfuggiva e che, quindi, lei mi sfuggiva interamente. Non era lei, e tuttavia non era nessun altro. L’avrei riconosciuta tra migliaia di donne, e tuttavia non la “ritrovavo”. La riconoscevo differenzialmente, non essenzialmente. La fotografia mi costringeva a un lavoro doloroso; proteso verso l’essenza della sua identità mi dibattevo tra immagini parzialmente vere e perciò totalmente false.” (Barthes, 2003, p. 67-68).

<sup>83</sup> Translated from: “Nella fotografia tutto il valore di esponibilità comincia a sostituire su tutta la linea il valore culturale. quest’ultimo però, non arretra senza opporre resistenza. Occupa un’ultima trincea e questa è il volto dell’uomo. Niente affatto casualmente il ritratto è al centro delle prime fotografie. nel culto del ricordo dei cari lontani o defunti il valore culturale dell’immagine trova il suo ultimo rifugio. Nell’espressione fuggevole di un volto umano, dalle prime fotografie, emana per l’ultima volta l’aura. E’ questo che ne costituisce la malinconica e incomparabile bellezza.” (Benjamin, 2014, p. 14-15).

the film's audiences. As this twofold process develops, Fgaier transfigures the archive footage as she changes its original meaning and emotional resonance in a way that elevates the footage. We have discussed in the section titled *Physical and meta-physical positioning of the author. Transfiguring the real* how instead of being pure reflections, images are mediated experiences of the real that involve a process of transfiguration. As we have discussed, some of the key mediating processes at play in documentary filmmaking are framing and editing. To sum it up, to frame is to exclude something: some elements are made visible while other elements are left outside the frame; in the same way, editing a film involves discarding some images while favouring others; through these processes the selected and rearranged frames are given meaning by the authors. If filmed footage is a subjective record of some of the reality that the author encountered, the film is a curated selection of this personal archive. It follows that archive footage is the result of a double mediation process: first the real was filmed, or mediated by a unique subjectivity, and then it was retrieved and selected by another author. An aspect of memory works in a similar way: events are first recorded in the mind by the self, and then they are retrieved by a different version of the self- usually one that has gathered more experiences and thus is more mature. Both material and immaterial archives are finite, which implies that they are mediated by subjectivities. As Anderson puts it: "there is no absolute archive, no absolute memory, because if it were absolute it would be unrecognisable. An archive is only recognisable because it is finite; and it is finite because for 'reasons both contingent and necessary, one cannot keep or save everything'." (Anderson, 2021, p. 107).

The editing of the film is guided by Fgaier's perspective that any one written or visual fragment of a work of art, even when separated or extracted from the context of the work, can still preserve its fundamental essence and overall meaning.<sup>84</sup> This approach makes for a balanced and horizontal editing that tends towards giving every fragment equal weight-presence does not seem more influential than absence, and silence does not narrate less than words. Such approach is in diametrical opposition to the editing of most commercial projects, studied to constantly seek and imprison the attention of the spectator through the use of clever techniques such as narrative hooks, cliffhangers, foreshadowing, etc.<sup>85</sup> In Fgaier's

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<sup>84</sup> Fgaier explained her editing approach during a workshop on film editing held at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, sede Sicilia, on 10-17 May, 2015.

<sup>85</sup> These are some of the narrative techniques that scriptwriters use to keep audiences engaged in contemporary commercial visual products. A hook is a compelling opening moment or element designed to immediately grab the audience's attention and make them curious about what happens next; a cliffhanger presents when the ending of a scene or episode, leaves a critical question

paradigm, every fragment of footage reverberates the ghostly presence of the others as they all share traces of the essence of the authors' intentions; any one fragment shows more than what it shows directly as it is also a projection of shadows of the other parts (even when they may not appear at all in the film), and these shadows may spill over the next fragment, and so on. This framework already suggests the operational boundaries of Fgaier's approach to film editing: selecting and arranging footage without following any rigid scheme guided by logic or causality. The themes of *Gli Anni* also breathe through this approach; the voice-over's emblematic opening sentence, which coincides with the opening line of Ernaux's novel, reads: "All images will disappear...". Both the film and the novel refer to the fleeting nature of memory, its unattainability, instability, and impermanence; however, the film's author is also opening a reflexive dialogue on the method behind the work. It is the only time that the film respects the chronological order of the extracts that Fgaier selected from the novel; right after a short pause, the voice short-cuts to another extract, later in the novel: "All the crepuscular images from the early years...". Once again, this refers to the ways in which the first memories of a person are shadowy, but their ghostly projections continue to live in the identity of the self for years to come; but it also suggests a reflection on the first images of a film, which become crepuscular or even irrelevant as the visual story unfolds. In the film, nothing is of the author- not the images, nor the words; at the same time, everything becomes of the author, and this ownership is established through an acausal editing approach, which keep the diverse materials together and allow the consciousness behind them to shine forth from the film. Not only are all fragments of the film haunted with the ghosts of their authors, and the ghosts that haunted their memories merge with the ghosts that haunt the memory of the spectator in a spectral dance; afterall, Derrida would highlight the spectral structure of the cinematic image in general (Derrida et al., 2015). The editing approach is hauntological, and it connects the spectral fragments of materials in an intuitive, synchronic way. As Fgaier herself clearly explains: "While I was editing the images, I realised that even the words I had to let go of, which would not appear in the final cut of the voice-over, continued to exist in the silent images. Somehow, the images had become those words, and I was editing them as if they were: a lightbulb would go off in my mind, telling me when and where to cut so that

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unanswered or a tense situation unresolved, encouraging the audience to continue watching or reading; and foreshadowing refers to subtle hints or clues about events that will occur later in the story, creating anticipation and building tension. Other techniques that increase the chances of keeping the viewer to watch include the Chekhov's Gun's principle, or the introduction of elements that will later become crucial, such as a gun; the ticking Clock, or a time constraint introduced into the story to create urgency and heighten the stakes, often seen in thrillers or action genres.

the previous image remained in the next one, like a flash, as happens between the lines of a poem where the last word can only tend toward and project itself onto the one that follows.” (Mileto, 2021, p. 3, author’s translation). As a result, each visual and written fragment is in a synchronic dialogue with the others. Despite the heterogeneity of materials, the film stands as a cohesive piece of work, with a clear structure and coherent aesthetic.

### **Auto-fiction, collective autobiography, hybrid memoir? Synchronic stratification of forms and meanings**

Built on the work of novelist Annie Ernaux, Fgaier’s film not only borrows Ernaux’s words, but also repropose a similar ambiguous narrative form that blurs the boundaries of autobiography, documentary, fiction and memoir across the personal and the collective dimensions of storytelling. In both works, memories are at once accounts and artifacts of past events, not only because the mind has a creative role in the process of remembering the past, but also because memories change as the person who remembers grows.

Blurring the boundaries of literary forms, Ernaux’s work has been described as both a “collective autobiography” (White, 2018) and “hybrid memoir” of postwar France (Schwartz, 2020) as it simultaneously speaks of a generation, yet adopting a diaristic-like tone that is at once intimate and detached, allowing for a unique intertwining of personal experiences with historical, cultural, and social events. Notably, Ernaux reflects on the process of writing as she writes the novel, highlighting her own shortcomings in recalling and structuring events in the written form; this openly doubtful reflexivity on form allows the reader to delve deep into her inner world as an author. For this, Ernaux has been described as a “memorist who distrusts her own memories” (Schwartz, 2020). In Ernaux’s work, the presence of the author is perceived not only in the content of the work and in the point of view, as she writes about her own life from her own perspective, but also in the declaration of fallibility of the author’s accounts. This is reflected in the author’s first novels’ point of view that shifts from the first person to the third person, as she refers to the past versions of herself. At times, the author recalls events of her own life from the “I” that remembers them at the moment of writing; at other times, she delves deep into them and describes them from her perspective as it was when the events occurred, or at other points in time. However, crucially, Ernaux knows that there is a difference, a gap in time and perspectives that translates to a change in meaning that the author must explore to investigate the self. While exactness might escape memory, this excavation into memory serves the higher purpose of transforming a private memoir into a collective story. While such an operation might seem undefined in the first novels of the

French author, it definitely becomes explicit in *Les Années*, where Ernaux shifts from an unstable first person to a stable third person: the “I” of her first novels becomes a definite “She”. Ernaux now sees her memories from a lucid close distance that makes them less opaque. While Ernaux might not be an authoritative voice when speaking of her past, from this point of declared doubtful listening she becomes a rigorous researcher of memory. In a 2017 interview, when asked whether her work was a way to imprint the past into memory, or if it is more of a tool to reflect on and process the past, in order to move beyond it, Ernaux responded: “Borrowing the reflections of philosopher Paul Ricoeur, I believe that memory is a form of knowledge because it contains millions of images and words. Borrowing from the terminology of computer science, one could say that memory holds millions of data, but unlike a computer’s memory, an individual’s memory constantly changes, bringing to light things that either illuminate the past or help understand the present. I see my writing as serving this purpose: to be a tool for understanding memory, and therefore reality itself.” (Milani, 2017). According to Ernaux, the reflexive element of her work is not a limitation that the author must overcome to access collective truth. On the contrary, reflexivity itself becomes the chosen research tool to build knowledge, and to build bridges between past, present and future dimensions.

By selecting and reconfiguring parts of Ernaux’s writings, Fgaier reorganises this simultaneously personal and collective work on memory and time. On the formal plane, Fgaier attaches the written word to moving images; and on the level of content, she rearranges someone else’s story to make it her own. This process takes place without betraying the essence of the novel not only for what concerns its main themes which remain in the film, but also in regards to the creative approach which is reflected in the filmic form. As anticipated, Fgaier arranges the found footage as if it represents spectral fragments of her own memory; a similar process to that of Ernaux, who retrieves and rearranges the memories around the story of her life. This parallel between the two artists continues to manifest in their authorial perspectives. Although it comes through as an intimate diary at times, Ernaux writes *Gli Anni* in the third person because her private “I” must transform into a public and collective “she” in order to become the magnet of a story intended for an audience. Fgaier also directs the film *Gli Anni* in what could be described as a filmic third person, as the author deploys the home movies of other women, whilst also maintaining Ernaux’s third person in the voice-over. However, in Fgaier’s creative process, the path is reversed. Fgaier’s “I” must emerge from the visible remains of a plurality of women that have been filmed in an undefined time-space dimension: to tell a story, Fgaier transfigures the material from a plural,

spectral and impersonal “she” to a more defined “her”. This transfiguration happens not by substitution but through stratification. As Ernaux’s memories stratify into Fgaier’s voice, Fgaier’s voice overlaps on the lost and found footage of women. Through this complex layering of memories and performative elements, Fgaier transfigures both the sardinian family movies and Ernaux’s words, as she connects these elements and imprints them with her authorial perspective. This imprinting happens metaphorically, through the creative process of making the film, and physically, as the author embeds translucent images of parts of her own body- photocopies of her hair, and of some old textile material that belonged to her grandmother- onto the found footage, creating a unique visual effect that translates the creative approach of stratification to the filmic form in a matheric way.

Fgaier’s perspective behind the film is more of a feeling than an idea- the experience of grief. The film becomes beautifully tragic, evoking tears for the inevitability of endings in life like death, loss, and divorce. By synchronically stratifying the materials with resonant elements, Fgaier amplifies and enhances their emotional substance rather than distorting it by opening and mediating a dialogue between auditory and visual fragments that expands on Ernaux’s work. Images and words blend and create a perturbing effect similar to that which visual culture scholars have examined as they analysed the visual and literal form of the photo-text (Cometa, 2016). Like in a photo-text, in Fgaier’s film words do not simply comment on images, and images do not merely illustrate text. Instead, both create a complex interplay where each element influences and destabilises the other, creating a disturbing “visual oscillation”, as described by Barthes (Cometa, 2016, p. 94). Through these interactions, words and images create precipices rather than building bridges of meaning; and thanks to these uncomfortable disruptions, the spectator is called to infer, deduct and imagine, and to put into relation the visible- what is shown in the film- with the invisible- what is imagined and subjectively known- to excerpt meaning. As exhumed by Cometa (Cometa 2016 b, p. 114), W. G. Sebald suggested through his novels that while words stimulate memory, photography produces oblivion. As Roland Barthes anticipated in *Camera Lucida*, family photo albums place a limitation to the imagination (and the capacity to imagine by remembering) of the viewer, replacing memory (or the creation of such) with factual images. As Fgaier’s voice-over reiterates in the film, memory is made of dreams and in memory ghosts from the past meet their present shadows. The obsession for the relation between memory, loss, and identity persists in Fgaier’s latest film, *Weightless* (2024; original title: *Sulla Terra Leggeri*). In the film’s story a man named Gian is struck by a sudden amnesia when his daughter, whom he does not recognise, retrieves an old diary that he wrote at twenty

years old that revolves around his first love. The film opens on a cartel displaying a quote from Julian Barnes' novel *Levels of life*: "We live on the flat, on the level, and yet - and so - we aspire. Some soar with art, others with religion; most with love. But when we soar we can also crash" (Barnes, 2013). The cartel is not the only reference to Barnes' work. Like the novel, "Weightless" is filled with images of the land and the sea as seen from above, and from an aeroplane (Gian's first love is an aviator), as well as archive footage of hot air balloons levitating in the sky. Fgaier's directorial notes for the film emblematically read: "To try to save from oblivion who we are and who we have been. It's not about reconstructing the past but discovering it, striving to rise to the most difficult challenge: losing someone and learning to find them again." (Fgaier, 2025, author's translation).<sup>86</sup>

Searching through, dismantling and then reorganising paragraphs, re-discovering and re-assembling images, giving a voice to the written word. Through these seemingly uninfluential operations, Fgaier stratifies new meaning to the materials. The author's "why" is openly declared through the words of Ernaux midway through the film: "Everything that was once shunned as shameful now becomes worthy of being rediscovered and brought to light through the lens of intelligence. And the more memory ceases to be humiliated, the more the future once again becomes a field of action." (From the film's voice-over, author's translation).<sup>87</sup> Both Fgaier and Ernaux tell stories to secure a future, mindful that storytelling and image creation are pivotal survival mechanisms for the homo sapiens, a theory that intrigues visual culture scholars (Cometa, 2017). The opening cartel of the film reiterates this concept, offering a way of accessing this interpretation to the spectator as well. "Writing to fight against the long life of the dead. To get rid of the shadows. And to set aside a little bit of life, saving ourselves from future disappearance. That, in itself, is already salvation." (From the film's voice-over, author's translation).<sup>88</sup> The purpose of filmmaking and storytelling is to live, to build a future that still holds the energy of agency.

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<sup>86</sup> Fgaier said: "Cercare di salvare dall'oblio chi siamo e chi siamo stati. Non si tratta di ricostruire il passato ma di scoprirlo, sforzandosi di essere all'altezza della prova più difficile: perdere qualcuno ed imparare a ritrovarlo". Reported on the *Locarno Film Festival* webpage, available at: <https://www.locarnofestival.ch/it/festival/program>. Last accessed: February 2025.

<sup>87</sup> Translated from: "Tutto ciò che ha rifuggito come vergognoso e che ora diventa degno di essere ritrovato, dispiegato alla luce dell'intelligenza. E più la memoria cessa di essere umiliata, più il futuro torna ad essere un campo di azione."

<sup>88</sup> Translated from: "Scrivere per lottare contro la lunga vita dei morti. Sbarazzarci delle ombre. E mettere via un po' di vita, salvandosi dalla sparizione futura. È già questa la salvezza."

## Conclusions

Fgaier's film is a spectral stratification of multiple narrative dimensions, including the distrusted memoir of Ernaux, the subjective world of Fgaier, and the undetermined male gazes filming women in Sardinia through the years. Each realm evokes ghosts that project shadows onto the other layers of storytelling, giving life to new meaning, as well as to innovative narrative and filmic forms, held together by an ethereal, uncanny atmosphere. This complex layering is achieved through a unique approach to the editing process, which does not follow a rigid, logical structure and instead assembles materials following a synchronic editing strategy. Serving as a cinematic companion to Annie Ernaux's *Les Années* (2008), *Gli Anni* transforms the ephemeral nature of memory into a visual and auditory experience. Through the recontextualisation of family videos, Fgaier elevates intimate, personal imagery into a universal reflection on time, loss, and identity. Her synchronic editing process mirrors Ernaux's literary fragmentation, allowing each fragment of footage or text to resonate beyond its immediate context. This approach underscores the haunting interplays between the written word and visuality, inviting the audience into a spectral dialogue that blurs the line between the personal and the collective. Ultimately, both the film and the novel paradoxically emphasise the impossibility of fully capturing memory, while simultaneously celebrating the ways in which its shadowy fragments allow the two self-reflexive authors to synchronically glimpse its essence precisely because they are subjective traces. Creating a tight sense of time passing through the sound design and visual effects, which suggest the metaphorical deterioration and gradual disappearance of things, people, and events that were part of a life's story, the film reminds the spectator how, in the words of Ernaux: "In conversation around a holiday table, we will be nothing but a first name, increasingly faceless, until we vanish into the vast anonymity of a distant generation" (Ernaux, 2015, p. 7, author's translation). As Barthes suggested, family images are not merely visual records but profound triggers for memory and emotion, as while they depict moments from the past, they also invoke a sense of loss and absence, revealing both the irrevocable passage of time and the unbridgeable distance between past and present time (Barthes, 2003). However, as Fgaier demonstrated, cinema will continue to put subjective worlds into spectral, collective images, which by reinventing form and stratifying meaning, will trigger new reflections in the generations to come.

**Exotopic forms.**  
**Honouring the real.**

## 12. Documenting pain through love. *Tomoko and mother in the bath* (1972).

On June 2nd, 1972, acclaimed photographer William Eugene Smith and his Japanese-American wife, Aileen Mioko Smith, published the photograph *Tomoko and mother in the bath* as the centrepiece of their photo essay titled “Death-flow from a pipe” in the issue number 21, volume 72, of *Life Magazine*. The work documented the devastating effects of severe mercury poisoning on human health and the environment in Minamata, a fishing village located on the Japanese island of Kyūshū, in the Kumamoto prefecture. Standing out as a prominent symbol of the physical, social and political struggles of the victims of mercury poisoning in Japan and their courageous battle for recognition and compensation, this remarkable work significantly contributed to raise the international profile of what we now refer to as “Minamata disease”, a cluster of neurological pathologies caused by mercury intoxication that can induce paralysis, insanity, coma, death, and cerebral palsy. When it was published in *Life Magazine* (1972), Smith’s photograph of Tomoko and her mother was untitled and accompanied by a caption that stated: “This is Tomoko Uemura. She was maimed by mercury poisoning in her mother’s womb. Blind, speechless, crippled and deformed since birth, she must be bathed, fed and cared for like an infant. She is now 17”. The managing editor of Life, Ralph Graves, introduced the image in his *Editor’s Note* (1972) with a short *ekphrasis*: “There is a tragic yet strangely beautiful photograph on pages 80-81 of this issue. It shows a young Japanese girl crippled by mercury poisoning being tenderly supported by her mother. (...) It bears the unmistakable signature of W. Eugene Smith. I believe this picture will rank as one of the greatest in (his) career.” (Graves, 1972).

This photograph, like most, if not all, documentary images, is both a document and a work of art; both a private memento of a devastated family and a public testimony to the effects of relevant environmental crimes. Because of this dual dimension, the image raises fundamental ethical questions, such as whether, how, and why it can be considered honourable, respectful, and permissible in relation to the experience of Tomoko and her family. As it became one of the most known and influential photographs of the past century, *Tomoko and mother in the bath* was discussed by some of the greatest minds of our times, including Susan Sontag and

John Berger. But this uncanny image of love and pain remains a mystery in many ways. Did Smith purposely pose the two women in the photo to resemble Michelangelo's *Pietà*, or did he capture them in a spontaneous embrace? How can the same photograph be perceived as a spectacle of suffering by some, and a monument to human strength and resilience by others? If Smith had secured the full consent of Tomoko and her family to photograph them in an intimate scene of profound vulnerability- naked in a bath, offering their physical and emotional pain to the spectator-, why did Tomoko's relatives felt the need to renegotiate the terms concerning the circulation of the photograph in more recent years?

Drawing from contextual elements surrounding the making of *Tomoko and mother in the bath*, like Smith's close relationship with Tomoko and her family, as well as the wider photo-textual research Smith carried alongside Aileen in Minamata, our goal will be to explore if an ethics of aesthetics can be traced for this controversial photograph. Far from searching for absolute answers, this discourse hopes to contribute to investigations around the complex dialogue between ethics and aesthetics in documentary images. More specifically, by looking at the trajectory of Smith's approach to photography throughout his career, we propose that Smith's late work may be viewed through the lens of a "listening gaze" based not on empathy but on *exotopy*, a concept developed by Russian philosopher Michail Bakhtin in the early twentieth century to explain the absence of a single, unified consciousness in modern Russian polyphonic literature. Thanks to this unique *way of seeing*, Smith may have been able to achieve the seemingly unattainable- to document pain through love, and to expand the content of the photograph- a tragic experience of care- through the context of an *exotopic* relationship based on the act of listening.

### **The Smiths and the *dancing cat illness***

The Smith's photo-textual inquiry in Minamata begun two years prior to 1972, in the fall of 1970, when Kazuhiko Motomura, a friend of Smith, introduced the photographer and his fiancée to the events concerning a Japanese village of fisherman that was suffering the effects of previous irresponsible industrial activity. From 1932 to 1968, *Chisso Corporation*, a Japanese chemical company now known as *Japan New Chisso*, used methylmercury as a catalyst to synthesise acetaldehyde, a lucrative compound widely used to manufacture other chemicals such as acetic acid, and then released untreated toxic industrial wastewater into Minamata bay. The continuous release of heavy metals into the sea led to a silent chain of

intoxication that began with the marine environment and spread to the local fishermen and their families through their habitual consumption of poisonous fish.<sup>89</sup>

Initially known as the “dancing cat illness”, the Minamata disease was reported for the first time in 1956, when a little girl with convulsions and other unusual symptoms was examined at Chisso’s hospital in Minamata. Within a few weeks, more local families requested examinations of similar cases. A *Strange Disease Countermeasures Committee* was formed to investigate the illness, which was officially linked to mercury poisoning in 1959. Despite Chisso's awareness of its responsibility, the company stopped discharging toxic levels of mercury into the environment in 1968, after 36 years of operations, only as a result of discontinuing production of acetaldehyde at their Minamata plant. Nonetheless, the sea sediment and fish remained contaminated and continued to intoxicate people under the blind eyes of Japanese authorities and an allegedly unaware international community.

After learning of the political silence surrounding these events, the Smiths decided to relocate to Japan on August 16, 1971, where they married 12 days later. After their wedding, the couple travelled to Minamata and rented a small, primitive house owned by the Mizoguchi family, who had lost their young daughter Toyoko to the disease. Their house was located in the area where poisonings were most prevalent. It wasn't until after the Smiths moved in that they realised the place contained Toyoko's shrine. In Smith’s account: “Our landlord reserved the right to pray in privacy at his daughter’s shrine. Separately I prayed too, although I am not a religious man. One day, the father discovered me praying and he could read the deep sorrow in my face. With an embrace, he thanked me for honouring his daughter with my feelings” (Smith W. E. and Smith A.M., 1975, p. 58). Toyoko was one of the first recognised victims of the Minamata disease.

As this event shows, since the very beginning of their research, the Smiths felt a close emotional connection to the victims of the disease and their families. During their time in Minamata from 1971 to 1974, the Smiths not only lived with the local community and adopted their daily habits, including eating the poisoned fish and drinking the polluted waters.<sup>90</sup> This immersive approach became the foundation of their photo-textual research, which culminated in the publication of the photographic book *Minamata: the story of the*

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<sup>89</sup> As reported in the Social Scientific Study Group on Minamata Disease (Hashimoto et al., 2001), Chisso increased its production of acetaldehyde from 210 tons a year in 1932 to a peak of 45,244 tons in 1960 (40% of the domestic production in Japan) becoming a top producer and exporter.

<sup>90</sup> As Ralph Graves wrote in his *Editor’s Note* (1972), the Smiths absorbed the lifestyle of the village of Minamata so deeply and for so long that they risked becoming victims of the disease as well.

*poisoning of a city, and of the people who choose to carry the burden of courage* (1975). Chisso's officials disapproved of Smith's reporting activity to the point where they ordered him to be severely and permanently injured to put an end to his inquiry. After the aggression, Aileen took over and, as Smith later declared in interviews, shot a significant share of the photographs included in their publication, as well as contributing to many of the writings.

### **Photographing the Uemura**

When the photograph *Tomoko and mother in the bath* was taken in December 1971, Smith's life-long visual inquiry, as well as his and Aileen's affection for Tomoko and her family, coalesced into an outstanding piece of work. At the time the Smiths had been living in Minamata for over a year, developing close relationships with many locals. The Uemura (or Kamimura) family was one of those poisoned by mercury.<sup>91</sup> Tomoko, their older daughter, had absorbed mercury as a foetus, saving her mother Ryoko from the disease. Since Tomoko removed all the poison from Ryoko's body, none of her six later siblings was affected by the disease. For this reason, the family called her "the treasure child".<sup>92</sup> Paralysed since her birth in 1956, Tomoko could emit sounds, blink and slowly move her fingers in the air; her mother took care of every aspect of her daily routine. One of the most intimate and bonding rituals they shared was taking a bath together in their traditional Japanese bathing chamber, where they entered both undressed, Ryoko safely holding Tomoko's body in her arms to dip it in the water in a caring embrace.

As both Susan Sontag and John Berger have highlighted, Smith's photograph unmistakably evokes Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1477-1479). Both works of art show a scene of intense emotional vulnerability. In the *Pietà*, Jesus' body appears limp, with wounds visible on his hands and side. The wounds, like Tomoko's deformed body, are exposed and almost offered to the eyes of the viewer. Both compositions are carefully balanced, with the mothers' figures slightly leaning forward to support the weight of their children's wounded bodies, emphasising their maternal care and protection. Smith's photograph and Michelangelo's *Pietà* share similarities but also differences. The *Pietà* depicts the Virgin Mary as unrealistically youthful, holding Jesus' lifeless and aesthetically perfect body with great sorrow, grief, and

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<sup>91</sup> The family name *Kamimura* was mistranslated from Japanese as Uemura due to a misreading of the first Japanese *kanji* of the word (上村). The New York Times highlighted the mistake in reference to the article "Minamata Bay. The end of a tragedy in pictures" by Andrew Pollack, published on the 3rd of August 1997. All publications by the Smiths refer to the family as the Uemura.

<sup>92</sup> As Aileen recalls (2001), prejudice and stigma continued to plague the Uemura family decades after Tomoko's death, affecting their marriage prospects and social standing.

maternal love. The representation lets out an explicit intention to move the viewer emotionally. As a contrast, Smith's photograph shows a scene of physical closeness where the two figures are captured in a naturalistic, non-idealised manner. Ryoko's serene expression and her relaxed posture suggest that she is concentrating on lovingly bathing her daughter. The authors' primary aim appears to be to present reality as it is, without censoring its raw aspects or trying to maximise its emotional impact.

As Sontag points out in her seminal essay collection *Regarding the pain of others* (2003), disaster-time photographs raise "issues of exploitation of sentiment (pity, compassion, indignation) and the rote ways of provoking feelings" (Sontag, 2003, p. 80). With Smith's photograph and its similarity to Michelangelo's work in mind, Sontag continues: "photographer-witnesses may think it more correct morally to make the spectacular not spectacular. But the spectacular is very much part of the religious narratives by which suffering, throughout most of Western history, has been understood" (Sontag, 2003, p. 80). These words refer to the fact that *Tomoko and mother in the bath* portrays an intimate scene in which physical and emotional vulnerability is exposed to the spectator's eye and its voyeuristic tendencies. This calls for a reflection on whether the experience of others can be honoured through photography, documentary image making, and representation in general.

While for Sontag such perceptions of similarity between the two works of art add "aura and beauty" to an image of intimate tragedy (Sontag, 2003, p.80), in Berger's view the photograph lays bare not only the experience of Tomoko and Ryoko, but also Smith's relationship with his own mother (Berger, 2013, pp. 166-171). According to Berger's sophisticated analysis, numerous outstanding photographs by Smith address the emotional theme of pity through a recurring scheme of a vertical carer, healer or mourner relating to a horizontal sufferer; in his words: "when (Smith) set out on a reportage, was intent on finding what he was looking for, and in one way or another, he was usually looking for the same thing – a Pietà." (Berger, 2013, p.235); Berger explains Smith's obsession with images of "tenderness and bereavement" triggered by the sentiment of pity through the context of his Catholic upbringing and conflicted relationship with his religiously devoted and narcissistic mother. Following this perspective, *Tomoko and mother in the bath* shows not only the effects of mercury poisoning on two innocent women, but also Smith's way of relating to a world where, in Smith's experience since his childhood, love and pain continuously battle and merge into the human experience. Such a dramatic view of the world also emerges from Smith's contrasted use of black and white, which he manipulates through lighting and framing as well as by spending hours developing his photographs in the darkroom. As Berger

provocatively asserts: “Smith’s most successful pictures look more at home in a church than in a museum.” (Berger, 2013, p. 169).

These words open to further questions regarding the representation of intimate scenes, that is how the perception of the exposed physical and emotional vulnerability changes with context. Mentioning once again Smith’s work along with two other acclaimed photographers from the ‘50s and the ‘60s, Werner Bischof and Don McCullin, who portrayed victims of war and the famine in India and in Biafra respectively, Sontag argues that the photographer’s motives do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which has a life of its own: “the same anti-war photograph may be read as showing pathos, or heroism, admirable heroism, in an unavoidable struggle that can be concluded only by victory or by defeat” (Sontag, 2003, p. 39). Clearly, caption, title and other contextual material about a representation have the power to direct its influence, or even create new meanings. Nevertheless, documentary images also reveal the “unmistakable signature” of their author, that *quid* about the image that cannot be entirely manipulated by the discourse around the representation. As Louis Marin’s reflections suggest, every image has a transitive dimension- what it directly represents; an intransitive one- the meaning others give to it; and a reflexive quality, which reveals the author’s subjective gaze on reality (Marin, 2014); following these considerations, it becomes apparent that documentary images are both multidimensional and intersubjective- they offer different perspectives on reality depending on the author’s gaze and intentions, the discourses around the representation, the context in which they are shown, as well as the cultural, subjective and emotional filters through which the spectator views an image or documentary film. As visual culture scholars have shown, representations, including documentary images, could be described as the result of intricate interplays of relations between the subjective gaze of authors, subjects, and spectators, the apparatus and the image itself (Cometa, 2020).

In light of these thoughts, if *Tomoko and mother in the bath* has been considered a permissible and even loving representation of such tragic experience by many over the years, Smith’s *way of seeing*, his and Aileen’s relationship to the two women, and the context of their research in Japan must be taken into account, along with considering what the photograph transitively shows. Smith passed away prematurely in 1978, shortly after the publication of *Minamata* (1975). The photograph of Tomoko and her mother represents the final chapter of his visual research after many years of experience as a photographer and photo-journalist around the world.

### **The expansion of Smith's *way of seeing***

W. Eugene Smith was born in Kansas in 1918. As a child, he enjoyed photographing aeroplanes, thanks to the fact that both his mother and grandmother were photographers and owned one of the first photographic equipment in the city of Wichita. After photographing sporting events in his youth, Smith became a photojournalist and covered Iwo Jima and Okinawa battles from the military front lines of the ground forces during World War II. In the course of this assignment, Smith was severely wounded because he insisted on standing very close to a shelling spot during heavy explosions. This paradigmatic event, along with his war photographs, which mostly capture war action in adrenaline-pumping contexts, show the extent to which Smith's first photographic interest was driven by the urgency of documenting history as it happened, regardless of risks. Upon returning to the United States as a wounded war hero, Smith was confined to a two-year long recovery in bed; during this forced semi-paralysis, he considered quitting his profession, until he photographed his children playing in their garden and decided otherwise.<sup>93</sup>

While working with Life magazine Between 1946 and 1955, Smith developed a highly innovative working method that differed greatly from his previous approach. Firstly, Smith began spending extended periods of time with his subjects to capture more intimate moments. Secondly, he began to select, print, and arrange photographs to create in-depth, character-driven photographic essays instead of publishing unrelated images. Lastly, having recognised that the order of the photographs played a crucial role in guiding the narrative of his visual stories, Smith requested he had the final word on their disposition and layout of the printing. During these years, Smith published influential photographic essays, such as "Country Doctor" (1948), "Nurse-midwife" (1951), and "A Men of Mercy" (1954). Thanks to this new working method, Smith developed an observational gaze with a marked interest in biographies that intended to document reality while telling a story, often the deeds of ordinary heroism of a compassionate caregiver.

After several conflicts over creative decisions, Smith resigned from Life in 1955. In addition to making him poor, being unemployed also deprived him of the social status that came with his previous position at the prestigious magazine. Around the same time, Smith left his wife, children and family home to move in a squalid apartment on Manhattan's Sixth Avenue, which he shared with jazz musicians, alcoholics and drug addicts; having lost his mother, he developed an addiction to alcohol and amphetamines while suffering from depression and

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<sup>93</sup> The photograph referenced is "The walk to paradise garden" (1946).

suicidal thoughts. From 1955 to the late 60s, Smith's creative drive took an unexpected introspective and autobiographical turn, and he began photographing his life, and the people who were a part of it, mostly by never leaving his building. Retired from the world, Smith photographed indoor jazz parties and street and city views from his loft's windows.<sup>94</sup> In comparison to his previous approaches to photography, Smith became a largely static observer of the world around him; the way he lived and conceived photography at the time suggest he was more inclined to identify with the "wounded patient" than with the fearless caregiver.

When Smith met Aileen in 1970, he did not anticipate that his best work had yet to emerge, and she did not expect to become an environmental activist, a photographer, and an international spokesperson as a result of their conjoint work in Japan. While in Minamata, Smith's approach to photography expanded even further through a renewed gaze on reality, which birthed a new and innovative apparatus, the photographic book, a publication that incorporated textual and visual work. Smith's unique point of view in *Minamata* (1975) comes from documenting a community for which he represented not only a hero caregiver-photographer, but also an anti-hero wounded patient (at the time, Smith was still openly an alcoholic). Having integrated these two ways of experiencing reality, Smith's mature gaze combined his early urgency to report history with his later interest in witnessing reality from a more still and introverted perspective. As we expand on below, unlike Smith's war photographs or his photographic essays, *Minamata* is neither a journalistic report, nor a character-driven story, but a polyphonic photo-textual narration where Smith's gaze allows witnesses to exist beyond his and Aileen's documentation project and narrative expectations.

### ***Of Human Destruction***

Combining photographs, narrative texts, facts, and poetry, *Minamata* could be described both as a political manifesto, and a personal photo-textual diary of the authors' three-year inquiry work in Japan. Some of the sections of this heterogeneous body of work are entirely textual, others are short photographic series, sometimes accompanied by comments or captions, and its most relevant chapters mix documentary images and text in ways that are not always self-explanatory. The book ends with a timeline of key events, followed by a medical report on the disease. These two final attachments underscore the authors' commitment to

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<sup>94</sup> Smith also wired his entire building with recording equipment and recorded thousands of hours of conversations, monologues and jazz sessions.

documenting reality by producing work that is in support of and consistent with the main medical, scientific, and historical facts about mercury poisoning. As Smith emblematically states at the end of the book's prologue: "To cause awareness is our only strength" (Smith W. E., and Smith A.M., 1975, p.8).

Far from leaving their intentions unexplained, the Smiths stress the non-neutral and partial nature of their situated and subjective point of view both implicitly and explicitly in their work. Throughout this non chronological publication, images and text interact to create visual and textual gaps, reminding the reader of the inherent incompleteness of all artistic research. Additionally, Smith declares the relevance of his subjectivity by opening the book's prologue with a warning for the reader: "This is not an objective book". As the prologue continues, Smith explains: "Putting aside the possibility of being "objective", we set our energies to the task of honestly understanding the complexities of the situation. Aileen and I made Minamata our home for more than three years. (...) We have tried to be honest, and fair, and if our understanding is great enough, we may have approached the truth." (Smith W. E., and Smith A.M., 1975, p. 7).<sup>95</sup>

These words suggest that photographic "truth" is in Smith's view a subjective experience; this does not imply that a visual objective truth does not exist, only that it cannot be found except by the purely subjective experience of it. As a result of their awareness of the limitations posed by their subjectivity, the authors of *Minamata* maintain a constant attitude of inquisitive listening towards witnesses both in their writings and photographs, to the point where they question whether it is possible at all to comprehend the other's experience in its entirety. Throughout the book, the authors express a recurring feeling of inadequacy when attempting to document the effects of mercury poisoning on people, an experience they suggest remains to some extent incomprehensible for non-victims, which makes any photograph of Minamata either an approximation or a failure to report the truth of such experience. For its authors, *Minamata* can be viewed more as an opaque representation rather than a transparent reflection of reality.

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<sup>95</sup> Taking a non-neutral point of view on Minamata also meant facing rage. While covering an organised protest at one of Chisso's factories, Smith, who was never deterred by physical risk throughout his career, was violently beaten on his eyes and arms. The attack forced him to a long hospitalisation. During this time, his wife Aileen served as the investigation's principal photographer. According to Smith, Aileen took about a quarter of the photographs and contributed significantly to the texts included in the book.

A particularly poignant section of the book is *Of Human Destruction*, which consists of nine sections, each dedicated to a family with confirmed Minamata disease patients. In these pages, the Smiths show and describe the physical, emotional, and social implications of the strange illness, in particular the sense of loneliness, shame and guilt that it created in victims. The Minamata disease was initially suspected to be contagious due to its strictly localised emergence, and so, to limit the spread of a supposed epidemic, the ill and their caregivers were isolated in solitary confinement. The diffidence toward victims continued even after the disease was officially declared to be non-contagious, destroying relationships and condemning a part of the community to social exclusion. As the Smiths recount: “Not only did the poison corrode living cells, it insinuated itself into relationships between neighbours. Yahei Ikeda was a tatami mat maker until 1958, when he became too ill to work. For years, while his health crumbled, he and especially his wife Natsue disparaged Minamata Disease patients, reflecting the general attitude that there was something loathsome about the victims of such trouble. Although they live in Detsuki and thus saw signs of a major outbreak all around them, they pushed away their neighbours, trying desperately to disassociate themselves from the poisoning.” (Smith W. E., and Smith A.M., 1975, p. 61).

*Tomoko and mother in the bath* was included in *Minamata* with central significance, but the authors chose to frame it in a more political discourse by placing it in the most militant chapter “Face to Face at Last”, where it was accompanied by the caption: “On the day of the patients' victory at court, someone wrote a headline: ‘The Day that Tomoko Smiled’. She couldn't have cared less. She couldn't possibly have known.” (Smith W. E., and Smith A.M., 1975, p. 138-39). These words refer to an image of Tomoko introduced earlier in the book where she is supposedly smiling; the photo also shows a group of people attending a meeting in the background, and is captioned: “Tomoko Uemura was taken to the Central Pollution Board for the benefit of others. The patients demanded that the board members look, touch, hold this child, and remember the experience as they evaluated human beings in dollars and cents.” (Smith W. E., and Smith A.M., 1975, p. 44). Here, Tomoko's photographs are a starting point to develop a different theme than the one presented in *Life's* 1972 photographic essay, which is the difference between their in-depth artistic visual inquiry and the faster and more superficial pursuits of some journalistic stories.

### **Exotopic listening in *Tomoko and mother in the bath* (1972)**

Many have described the photograph of Tomoko and Ryoko, and Smith's approach to photography in general, as deeply empathetic. The concept of “empathy” in its etymological

meaning (from the ancient Greek words ἐν - “in, at”, and πάθος - “passion” or “suffering”- the capacity to feel or understand what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference) might, however, be misplaced. Considering Smith's witnesses seem to exist outside of his frame of reference, as we expand on below, the term exotopy refers to a concept coined by Michail Bakhtin to explain the absence of a single-minded consciousness in the Russian polyphonic novel, might describe Smith's gaze more accurately (Bakhtin, 1984; see the sections *On Dialogues of images, images as dialogues.* and *Exotopy* in the chapter *In the world, not about it. Dialogical aspects of documentary*). As discussed, exotopy, according to Bakhtin, defines the emotional and intellectual ability of certain authors, such as Dostoyevsky, to allow their fictional characters to develop and express their own consciousness as independent from that of the author's. Through exotopy, authors contemplate their characters from a position of “distant proximity” which creates the space necessary to explore otherness in the awareness that the author's consciousness, that is their emotional and psychological filters, prevent a complete understanding, an equal participation, and an objective observation of the other's experience. In order to achieve exotopy, the author must engage with his characters as though they were separate, individual beings rather than mere projections of their own emotional world. To accomplish this, authors must be able to separate their emotions from those of their characters, while simultaneously being aware that they can only observe them through the lens of their own authorial subjectivity. In other words, exotopy stems from the author's willingness to listen to their characters/witnesses with a disposition of openness toward unfamiliar emotional and psychological realms. Through the process of what we have called a “listening gaze” earlier in this work, authors seek to discover their witnesses' experiences through an exotopic position of listening, without judging or minimising their testimony, and without interfering with their processes, while at the same time being aware that their subjectivity is part of the inquiry; becoming an exotopic listener implies releasing the expectation to be able to fully understand otherness outside of the “I” that experiences the relationship, while embracing that failure to do so is to some extent inevitable. As Bakhtin suggests, paradoxically, by facing the irreducible presence of their subjectivity, authors progressively see the experience of the other for what it is.

Our hypothesis is that exotopic listening can translate into conscious or unconscious spatial, technical, and relational choices in documentary image making. As an example, the author-listener might relate to their witnesses from a “listening distance”, filming or photographing them from a horizontal axis, and capturing them in familiar contexts that show

the quality of their relationship. Having looked at the concept of exotopy on one hand, the evolution of Smith's gaze and the context surrounding the publication and making of *Tomoko and mother in the bath* on the other, we can examine Smith's photograph in more detail, seeking to understand whether it honours the testimony of the Uemura. As anticipated, our focus is directed towards what the image reveals rather than what it shows, such as Smith's gaze, approach, and relationship with his witnesses. When tracing these contextual elements, it might be more useful to examine technical and relational aspects that reveal Smith's open or hidden motives without focusing too much on whether they were intentional or intuitive decisions, since the gaze is not only consciously subjective, but is also influenced by subconscious ways of interacting with reality (Cometa, 2020).

From a technical point of view, we can consider the distance between Smith and his witnesses, the lens used and the positioning of the camera with respect to Ryoko and Tomoko. The image can be estimated to have been taken from one to two metres away, or what can be described as a "listening distance". With this specific distance, Smith would have been close enough to listen comfortably to the women, but not too close to invade their personal space. The positioning of the camera with respect to the subjects also reflects Smith's balanced way of relating. As we can see from the photograph, although the lens is slightly inclined toward the ground, possibly to give justice to the women's faces given the little space available, Smith's camera is not viewing the Uemura from above, but is rather in search of a horizontal axis of observation. As a result, the spectator, who is also placed in a horizontal position with respect to the women in the photograph, is encouraged to learn how Smith engaged in a dialogic relationship with his witnesses.

As far as the lens is concerned, we know that Smith used a 16mm, a wide-angle lens that distorts reality more than other lenses built to mimic the human gaze, such as the 35mm. However, this specific combination of distance, framing, and lens produces the illusion of a human gaze: even though the 16 mm changes the perception of the space by making it wider to fit the frame, the eye of the spectator tends to focus on the realism of the scene rather than seeing the distortions. Clearly, as it often happens, Smith faced great limitations in the choosing of the distance and lens since he was photographing the Uemura in a tiny bathing chamber, and he presumably wanted to capture Tomoko's full body in the photograph. Nevertheless, intentional or not, Smith's combination of technical choices allows the viewer to observe a realistic scene from a respectful distance, not too close to encourage any voyeuristic tendencies of the eye, and not far enough to induce a less intimate and more analytical gaze towards the subjects.

Following our hypothesis that the image can also uncover relational elements, let's consider how it is telling of the emotional and intellectual position of Smith with respect to the Uemura by exploring whether Smith captured the Uemura in a spontaneous position or if it was staged. The two women seem at ease in the scene, which suggests that Smith was not observing the bathing ritual for the first time at the time of the shooting. Smith's research in Minamata, the way he embraced the local lifestyle, and how he became a member of the community, make this easy to imagine. Furthermore, the fact that the two women accepted the presence of Smith, a western married man, and his wife, inside their bathing chamber when naked is telling of the level of trust the Uemura had toward the Smiths, a kind of relationship that usually develops over time through repeated displays of affection, care and respect. Later events also demonstrate the strength of their bond. At the wishes of Tomoko's family, the photograph was withdrawn from further publication in 1997, twenty years after Tomoko's death. At the time, the copyright of the photograph belonged to Aileen. Upon announcing that she would no longer release the photograph at a press conference held in France on July 5, 2001, Aileen explained: "Tomoko's parents, now nearly a quarter-century since her death, wanted Tomoko to rest. "*Yasumasete agetai*" ("we want to let her rest") were their words. And I felt the same. This photograph would mean nothing if it did not honour Tomoko. It would be a profanity if it continued to be issued against the will of Tomoko and her family. As copyright holder, (...) this particular decision made on the photograph was an act of exercising copyright, not relinquishing it." (Smith A., 2001).<sup>96</sup> As it has been highlighted (Aufderheide, Jaszi, and Chandra, 2009), when determining whether documentary images are permissible and necessary, it is crucial to give authors and witnesses a voice for they might be the only ones who can truly establish it, and this would seem a good enough reason for them to be considered the only legitimate holders of the copyright to their representations.

The Smiths clearly held Tomoko and her family in high regard, and they were invited to participate in a scene that they had most likely witnessed before. Nevertheless, the presence of performative elements in the photograph cannot be ignored. The way the light sculpts the plasticity of the two marble-like bodies, the flawless positioning of the limbs, and how the two women offer themselves almost willingly to the camera; all these elements suggest that

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<sup>96</sup> The photograph was still included in later exhibitions, such as the one mentioned by Stephenson (2017). Aileen granted permission to exhibit the image in this non-profit academic context; she viewed this particular occasion as different from reproducing the image for postcards, calendars, or other products.

their pose was, at least to some extent, staged. In addition, given that Smith was likely confined in a semi-fixed spot due to the lack of space in a tiny room filled with photographic equipment, it is not difficult to imagine the photographer asking his subjects to adjust to the perfect position for the camera rather than moving the equipment to follow their spontaneous movements. It is clear from the photograph that Smith's eye is in search of an aesthetically pleasing composition, and this creates a distance between the viewer and the two women. But this distance is a neutral effect of the intrinsic aesthetic power of the image. There is no explicit intent to idealise Tomoko and her mother or to depict them as perfect, unreachable victims. On the contrary, they are captured while performing habitual gestures, and they appear relatable in their humanity. Staged or not, the realism of the image prevails over its beauty.

The viewer, however, feels a sense of estrangement from the scene; but rather than it being an effect of the outstanding aesthetical harmony of the image, it may be owing to the fact that the focus of the photograph is the relationship between a mother and her daughter, who are sharing an intimate moment that the Smiths, as well as the spectator, are observing from the outside. The photograph does not directly ask the viewer to participate in what the two women are going through, only to observe them from a distance close enough to "hear" their feelings, but far enough to know that sharing their experience is not possible. This unusual emotional position of "distant closeness" that arises in the viewer from feeling inside and outside the scene at the same time allows for a balanced and compassionate understanding of the experience of the other through a strange sense of unattached participation. This is reinforced by the facial expression and physical plasticity of Tomoko's mother in the picture. Ryoko appears peaceful and almost unbothered by the disease as she focuses on the present act of bathing her daughter. Ryoko's apparent serenity transfers, at least temporarily, the burden of reality and the tragic effects of the illness from the two women to the viewer. Meanwhile, the photograph emits such strong sense of connection that one can almost feel Smith's and Aileen's presence behind the camera; this feeling has the effect to dissolve discontinuity between mother and daughter, the two naked women and the water, the bath scene and the Smiths, the Smiths taking the photograph and the spectator watching the image, all witnessing the same loving and devastating experience. The closeness between the Smiths and the Uemura invites the spectator to listen from a position of understanding, knowing that failing to feel their exact emotions is inevitable. Consequently, because of this dual effect of detachment and intimacy, the image simultaneously conveys a sense of peace and love, and

of pain and separation about an experience which might not be fully communicable and shared, but must be communicated and heard.

Sam Stephenson, documentarian and author of several volumes on the life and work of W. Eugene Smith, in his biography *Gene Smith's sink* tells of having met Aileen on the occasion of a photographic show in which an original print of *Tomoko and mother in her bath* was exhibited. It is the first time that Stephenson sees the photograph printed, and of this crucial experience he remembers: “A coincidence of circumstances at the exhibition (...) caused me to be moved in a manner that I thought had been worn smooth by years of research. Or, perhaps, this was simply the best print of this image that I had ever seen. In any case, I came away with a clearer understanding that Tomoko and her mother were in a very small room and how close Smith must have been to them in this devastating and tender scene; how much trust Tomoko's mother must have felt toward him and Aileen; that, although Smith was in such poor physical condition in those years, he could manage to craft such a print; and that this print was the culmination of his life and work, all of his passions and interests along with darkroom techniques coming together in one printed picture. No need for a complicated sequence of images. This one would do. His life's work was complete. It was okay for him to die now”. (Stephenson, 2017, p. 150).

## Conclusions

By looking at Eugene Smith's notorious photograph *Tomoko and mother in the bath*, a tender and tragic representation of the effects of mercury poisoning on human health, this work considered how Smith's unique *way of seeing* enabled him to master the uncanny art of documenting pain through love. To our understanding, the photograph shows not only two victims of mercury poisoning, but also the conquests of Smith's life-long quest to explore, narrate and honour the experiences of others. In exploring Smith's photographic career, we examined his late photo-textual work in Minamata through the lens of exotopy, a concept developed by the philosopher Michail Bakhtin to explain the absence of unified consciousness in modern Russian polyphonic literature in the early twentieth century. According to Bakhtin, exotopy is the author's ability to let characters exist outside of their emotional and psychological frames of reference. In documentary image making, exotopy can be viewed as a disposition to listen, an ability to open to levels of consciousness that are unknown to the author. As we examined the technical choices and contextual elements behind the creation of *Tomoko and mother in the bath*, we sought to identify in the image the visual traces of an exotopic listening relationship between the authors, Smith and wife Aileen, and

their witnesses, Tomoko and Ryoko Uemura. Considering Smith's approach as exotopic was helpful to investigate some of the mysteries surrounding this controversial image of affection and suffering. In particular, we explored the possibility that Smith's exotopic listening might create a unique feeling of unattached participation in the viewer, allowing them to understand otherness deeply. By attempting to decode a photograph that reveals physical, emotional and psychological vulnerability, our goal has been to show that aesthetic decisions, either intentional or unconscious, are in an indivisible dialogical tension with ethical aspects; in turn, the ethical dimension of a documentary image might manifest in the image itself, thus making it visible. Documentary images appear to be intersubjective and multidimensional objects resulting from intricate webs of relations between the gaze of authors and spectators, the context in which they are produced and shown, the relations between the subjectivities involved, the apparatuses involved in their production and circulation, as well as their transitive dimension (what they directly show). When looking at documentary images, the level of complexity at play makes it difficult, if at all possible, to find definite answers. In Benjamin's words: "Regardless of how skilled the photographer is, and no matter how meticulously the model's pose is arranged, the observer experiences an irresistible urge to find in a certain type of image a spark of chance—the *hic et nunc* with which reality has, so to speak, imbued the image with its character. One feels compelled to pinpoint the barely visible moment in which, at the very essence of that long-past minute, the future still nests today, with such eloquence that, in retrospect, we are able to discern it." (Benjamin, 2015, p. 17, author's translation).<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, it is crucial to continue reflecting on how the aesthetical, ethical and transitive dimensions interact, especially when looking at images of vulnerability. The goal is not to establish a judging moral compass, but rather to discover how documentary images relate to reality, truth, and subjectivity, so that we may be able to face, elaborate and perhaps eventually transform the most emotionally dense aspects of human experience.

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<sup>97</sup> Translated from: "Per quanto il fotografo sia abile, e per quanto la posa del suo modello sia accuratamente calcolata, l'osservatore avverte l'impulso irrefrenabile di cercare in un'immagine di un certo tipo una scintilla di casualità, l'*hic et nunc* con cui la realtà ha, per così dire, strinato il carattere dell'immagine; si avverte l'impulso di individuare il punto appena visibile in cui, nell'essenza di quel minuto ormai lontano, si annida ancor oggi il futuro, e con tale eloquenza che guardando indietro, riusciamo a scoprirlo".

### **13. Close distance, and the space in between. *In Vanda's room* (2000), and *At Berkeley* (2013).**

This section further explores the concept of exotopy, presented earlier in this thesis, and discussed in through Eugene W. Smith's work in the previous section, in relation to two seminal documentary films: Pedro Costa's *In Vanda's room* (2000) and Frederick Wiseman's *At Berkeley* (2013). These works stand as two polar approaches to documentary filmmaking: Costa's poetic, introspective style contrasts sharply with Wiseman's structural and observational methodology. However, as we argue below, both exemplify how exotopic filmic forms emerge not from a single cinematic tradition but through specific authorial physical and metaphysical positioning in relation to the real.

#### **Costa and Wiseman**

Costa's films, such as *In Vanda's room* (2000) and *Vitalina Varela* (2018), are meticulously and collaboratively constructed, blending ethnographic realism with a highly stylised, painterly aesthetic. As far as images are concerned, Costa tends toward static shots with a focus on light and shadow, often evoking Caravaggio or Rembrandt in his visual compositions. His approach towards the editing is slow and contemplative, often rejecting traditional narrative structures in favour of lyrical storytelling. Through his intimate collaborations with non-professional actors, Costa creates a filmic space where fiction and documentary converge, in which they can perform their own realities. Costa's subjects, often marginalised individuals, co-create their stories in a process that blurs traditional boundaries between filmmaker and witness. Costa often shoots with minimal crews and controlled setups, so as to inscribe an intensely personal and intimate space. His films are meditative, exploring individual subjectivities and often painful experiences of people living at the margins of society.

As opposed to Costa's approach, Wiseman's documentary films, from his first works like *Titicut Follies* (1967) and *High School* (1968), to his latest films such as *Ex Libris: The New York Public Library* (2017) and *Monrovia, indiana* (2018), follow a fly-on-the-wall method. Wiseman is interested in the structures and dynamics of institutions like prisons, hospitals,

libraries, museums, labs, and schools, and how they reflect broader cultural and socio-political issues. His films investigate how individuals interact with and are shaped by these systems, as opposed to focusing on individual lives and marginal voices. His minimalist, observational approach to aesthetics could not be more different than Costa's. As opposed to the existential and personal dimension of Costa's films, Wiseman's cinema adheres to direct cinema traditions, aiming for a seemingly unfiltered representation of institutions. It is seemingly unfiltered because, as Dottorini explained, "Direct does not mean natural: cinema is direct in the sense that it positions itself directly before the uncertainty of reality, constantly seeking the form through which to expose itself." (Dottorini, 2019, p. 22, author's translation).<sup>98</sup> Wiseman categorically avoids all direct interventions that immediately and explicitly unveil the presence of the director behind the camera, including interviews, voiceovers, and music.<sup>99</sup> In his films, events seemingly unfold as they happen, giving the naive spectator the illusion of seeing everything. Unlike Costa's fragmented approach to storytelling, Wiseman's editing builds narrative and logical progressions of sequences. In contrast to Costa's one-on-one relationships with his subjects, Wiseman's approach prioritises context over singular stories, and puts the personal in service of the collective or social system.

The aesthetics of Costa and Wiseman diverge due to their different backgrounds and methods. Wiseman's approach does not involve pre-production research since he believes the filming is the research. During his 2006 seminar at the Doc Film Institute of the San Francisco State University, Wiseman discussed his structured working method in detail: firstly, he focuses on getting the permission to film from the institution he has an initial interest for; once there, without any preexisting idea on the film's themes, lead characters or direction, and after spending a day or two on the place to get a sense of the spaces, he shoots for about two months, so as to collect about one hundred hours of footage; then, he dedicates less than a year to the editing process following a fixed scheme of work that involves eight

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<sup>98</sup> Dottorini originally wrote: "diretto non significa naturale: il cinema è diretto in quanto si pone direttamente di fronte all'incertezza del reale, cercando ogni volta la forma attraverso la quale esporsi (esponendosi)." (Dottorini, 2019, p. 22).

<sup>99</sup> The only filmed interviews in Wiseman's films are interviews that were conducted in the context of the institution he is filming, such as psychiatrists interviewing incoming patients in "Titicut Follies"(1967). As far as music is concerned, the rare presence of a soundtrack is diegetic and does not comment on the images. The only exception that comes to mind is one of the opening sequences of "High School"(1967), in which a car radio plays Otis Redding's "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay" and the chorus singing about "wasting time" might refer to the shared experience of high schools for many students (Ruoff,1993, p. 33).

months to select and edit about eight candidate sequences for the final cut; a few days for the final structure; and an additional month to get the right internal rhythm.<sup>100</sup> On the very other end of possibilities lies Costa's flowy working method, which he discussed in two masterclasses, the one he held at Rotterdam Film Festival in 2020, and the other at the Chicago International Film Festival in 2006. Costa started from fiction cinema but quickly transitioned to documentary, which allowed him to employ a different approach- shooting alone, filming for long periods of time, with people he already knew, without any script or set plan. However, given his background, Costa's process incorporates elements of fiction, such as staged repetitions of scenes. Furthermore, subjects are compensated, though often symbolically rather than salaried, reflecting their dual role as participants and witnesses. Although Wiseman's observational, non-intrusive style contrasts sharply with Costa's immersive, performative approach, describing them as outright opposites oversimplifies their shared ethos. Both filmmakers aim to reveal deeper truths about society and the human condition; both openly refuse to conform to commercial filmmaking conventions.<sup>101</sup> Both craft open filmic forms that allow their audiences extraordinary space and freedom to interpret and engage with their works. As we explore in more detail in the sections below, Wiseman examines systemic structures through rigorous institutional studies, while Costa poetically reconstructs the personal stories of marginalised individuals. Together, they illuminate the spectrum of possibilities within documentary cinema, demonstrating that exotopic forms can emerge from divergent yet equally profound methods.

### **In search of exotopy when filming non-actors. *In Vanda's room* (2000)**

Set in the slums of Lisbon's Fontainhas neighborhood, Pedro Costa's *In Vanda's room* (Original title: *No Quarto da Vanda*, 2000) revolves around the life of Vanda Duarte, a young woman addicted to heroin<sup>102</sup>. Shot largely within the confines of her small, dimly lit room, the

<sup>100</sup> Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kZOUfVDrEM>

<sup>101</sup> Costa declared in various masterclasses, including the ones at Rotterdam and Chicago, that most film festivals are corrupted and capitalistic machines. Wiseman insists on producing and distributing his films outside of the film industry, mostly through his own production company, Zipporah Films.

<sup>102</sup> *In Vanda's room* is the second film in Costa's Fontainhas saga, after *Ossos* (1997), which also featured the participation of Vanda Duarte, and before *Colossal Youth* (2006), *Horse Money* (2014), and *Vitalina Varela* (2019). Costa got to know Fontainhas after making his second feature film, *Down to Earth* (1994), which he shot in Cape Verde. As he recalled at the Chicago International Film Festival in 2006, Costa came back from the island with parcels and letters from Cape Verdeans he had met during the making of the film, addressed to their relatives and friends who had emigrated to Portugal. They had asked Costa to deliver them by hand in Fontainhas, where many migrants were living at the time.

film documents Vanda's conversations, drug use, and interactions with neighbours as the area undergoes a violent and surprisingly close demolition process. The narrative unfolds without a conventional plot, focusing instead on the rhythms of life in a community on the brink of erasure. *In Vanda's room* is the second film in Costa's Fontainhas saga, after *Ossos* (1997), which also featured the participation of Vanda Duarte, and before *Colossal Youth* (2006), *Horse Money* (2014), and *Vitalina Varela* (2019).

A masterpiece of slow cinema and a pivotal work in Costa's filmography, *In Vanda's room* marks Costa's transition from traditional filmmaking to a more documentarian style that blurs the boundaries between filmic forms. While his previous film *Ossos* (1997) was shot on 35mm with a relatively large film crew, for *In Vanda's room* Costa started filming on MiniDV with the newly released Panasonic DVX-100. As Costa explained during his 2020 masterclass at the International Rotterdam Film Festival (IFFR), the switch to digital film and to a portable, lightweight camera allowed him to shoot *In Vanda's room* mostly alone, allowing him to spend longer time with his subjects in order to make the film he wanted within the timeframe he deemed necessary.<sup>103</sup>

*In Vanda's room* presents a story on the border of what some might find permissible for the camera to film and for the spectator to view. The film depicts with a striking sense of matter-of-factness the everyday lives of self-destructive people that seem to have lost any hope of change, and that lack the full awareness that there is something that needs change more than the motivation to do so. The decision to represent Vanda's way of living required Costa to hold a great ethical responsibility in determining how far the gaze should go without becoming uselessly voyeuristic. In response, Costa sought to co-create the film fully with Vanda. As Costa recalls: "When we shot *Ossos*, I wasn't happy and they, especially Vanda, weren't happy. We talked about it and decided to do something else, to work differently. It was a very vague idea. One day I just appeared with a small video camera, a backpack, a tripod and some Mini-DV tapes. I started like that. Vanda considered it, permitted it and collaborated. I proposed to do something that was more like a documentary. "When you have to do stuff, perhaps I'll follow you if you want. If you don't want me to, I will not." I didn't know exactly what I was doing; there were no rules. There were moments when she said: "Now I have to leave to sell vegetables." Sometimes I went with her, to shoot or just to watch. Sometimes, she went somewhere else and I could decide to go with her or not. There

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<sup>103</sup> Thanks to the transition to digital film, Costa's cinema also escaped the capitalistic machinery of contemporary cinema, as he explained at the IFFR masterclass in 2020, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X42r8vB4tZE>, last accessed: December 2024.

was never an interdiction. Sometimes we were tired of just being there. Sometimes we both felt it was time for me to go. It was a very special thing. There was this contract, this agreement, but there was also a danger, an unknown part. I always say that I didn't have a producer, that I was alone. This has to do with this danger, no producer would follow me because of this danger. And the ultimate danger was the possibility of Vanda dying.” (Desiere, 2014).

An astonishing example of the aesthetic possibilities of digital film, Costa's work transforms individuals that some may consider dispensable into vivid and vital presences without glorifying their actions. However, Costa's addicts are not represented as pitied victims of a doomed fate, contemporary anti-heroes of the geographical and human peripheries of a corrupted capitalistic system, or the charming exemplars of an anthropological expedition into the unknown realms of a lost ghetto. On the contrary, the images show a respectful distant closeness of the filmmaker, that is neither celebrative glorification, nor moral detachment from their lives. The reasons, once again, lie in Costa's technical choices and positioning in the physical and meta-physical space. Shot almost entirely at what we have previously described to be a “listening distance” of the camera from the subjects, and edited in a way that breathes in deep attunement to the pace and rhythm of the lives of its witnesses, the images abstain from negative or positive judgements, and instead lead the spectator to see through the representation and stare directly into the humanness of the subjects, like in a Rembrandt painting. Making use of darkness and the colour black to create a suggestive chiaroscuro, Costa's visual approach embraces both lights and shadows of the real with a loving neutrality, rather than presenting a moral grid to interpret the world. Costa's inclusive and collaborative approach leaves visible traces in the images, which consistently suggest that the spectator and Vanda exist on the same horizontal human plane. When asked about the film's unique “straightforward” form, Costa replies: “*In Vanda's room* is much more face to face. There is a face to face with the viewer, which is first and foremost the director's view. Because the director is the first spectator. There is a confrontation. It is like in Hitchcock, there is a counter shot that is not there but is essentially you. Vanda is there, but the other image is you. It is you facing that suffering, anger, silence... and it works. If not, the film wouldn't work. I think it needed this simplicity.” (Desiere, 2014). However, this horizontality is not an invitation to identify with his subjects. On the contrary, Costa expressed his wish for the public to search for a disidentification from his films. During his IFFR masterclass in 2020, Costa asked the audience: “When you saw *In Vanda's room*, did you really see Vanda?”; as he warns, even though the spectator's tendency is to project themselves onto the

film, the film is actually trying to teach them to see the otherness; Costa's intent is precisely that: spending a lot of time and energy using the means of cinema at the best of his ability to learn to see Vanda, and to share this vision with an audience. To achieve this, he needs to find some distance from his subjects, granted to him through solitude. As he puts it: "I am feeling very afraid and lonely when I am in front of someone I am filming." (Costa at the IFFR, 2020).

This refers to the exotopic distance that Costa maintains during his collaboration with his subjects. When asked whether the character of Ventura in his later films is fabricated between him and the director, Costa expands on this by reporting what Ventura told him: "Do not for one second think that you can understand me, that you can know what I am, that you can even get inside of me. Just because you have a camera, does not mean you can!" (Eguchi, 2008). To which he comments: "You can never understand, you can never be with the other. (...) You cannot have this fusion. So I think it's better to think that there is a space, that there is a difference, a distance between two human beings. And this is good. This is what creates possibilities. It's possible for us to live together because there is a space here. And this space thinks and works. It's the space that makes you think, that makes you work. So I think the film was made around that. He (Ventura) said, don't think your camera has a magical power, that you can capture all my sufferings, all my past years. Let's simply do the film. Let's keep on going. So that calmed me down a little bit. I like to work with people like this because they tell you things like this. An actor would never say this to you. An actor would never say, don't film me like that because you cannot understand me. The actor always says the opposite. I want to try more. I want to express more. I want to reveal more. I like to work with them (non professional actors, witnesses) because they don't reveal enough. They keep things inside. They keep secrets. They keep a mystery. I think that there is a mystery that will never be revealed and that's very good. That's the magic of it. To feel that something has escaped." (Eguchi, 2008)

Costa is talking about his unique, exotopic relationships with collaborators. Costa's films are an open, dynamic, non-ending dialogue with his subjects through time, as they often return in later films, and so do their relatives and friends. We have discussed this kind of relationship in the chapter "Documenting pain with love", in relation to the bonds between Eugene W. Smith and Aileen M. Smith and the fishmongers of Minamata. Costa's work brings up another perspective that is specific to documentary cinema as opposed to fiction, where images represent the often painful lives of people, with the relative ethical implications.

Do Costa's images honour these experiences? We have attempted to find the answer in the images, which seem to show relationships built on affection, patience, care, hope, and mutual protection between human beings that electively choose to support one another despite their many differences in multiple endeavours that to some may constitute significant "imbalances in power", as we discussed in the chapter titled *In the world, not about it. Dialogical aspects of documentary*.<sup>104</sup>

### **Polyphonic documentation and exotopic storytelling in *At Berkeley* (2013)**

Frederick Wiseman's films share a consistent philosophical and methodological foundation that manifest in recognisable filmic forms, that are characterised by observational footage, a consistent focus on institutions and their implicit hierarchies, the use of the editing process to construct storytelling, and an understated visual style. However, Wiseman's approach and style also subtly adapts to the various subject matters that he chooses to represent so that each film offers a distinct perspective. These differences take shape in the tone and emotional engagement of the film, in its structural choices, and in both the placement of the camera and editing complexity. For example, films like *Titicut Follies* (1967), *Hospital* (1969) and *Primate* (1974) include unsettling images due to their confrontational themes and inquisitive gaze, that at times seeks to expose abuse; in these films, the editing tends to build tension through a linear progression of sequences, while the camera's slightly enhanced proximity amplifies the enclosed and sometimes invasive atmosphere. Other films, like *Ex Libris: The New York Public Library* (2017), and *Monrovia, Indiana* (2018), where the camera tends to focus more on groups and social routines, while events unfold through a loose and mosaic-like structure, are more detached and visually rich, seeking to create a sense of community observation.

Far from being one-dimensional, Wiseman's approach remains true to his overarching vision of the real across his films, which exemplifies dialogism and exotopy by allowing multiple voices and perspectives to coexist in a polyphonic, non-directive, non-dialectical and non-didactic narrative that sheds light on social institutions from a specific outsider-insider

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<sup>104</sup> In 2019, the Locarno Film Festival's press team interviewed Pedro Costa and Vitalina Varela, the protagonist of Costa's homonymous film *Vitalina Varela* (2019) which was presented at *Locarno International Film Festival*. To promote the film, the Festival produced traditional interviews in a staged setting, edited over mood-setting soundtracks (in Vitalina Varela's case, a soft piano tune). Available respectively at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5GSLDILIGo> and: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BiaD4ts5uX0>, last accessed: December 2024. These filmed exchanges once again display the affectionate alliance between Costa and his subjects.

perspective. By exotopic storytelling we make a reference to Wiseman's position of listening towards the real. Notably, Frederick Wiseman exemplifies a listening approach in his films, where he personally manages the direct sound recording, physically situating himself in a position of active listening as events unfold. Scholars who have written about Wiseman's work identified in his films an awkward and generative silence (Smith, 2013) and a "refusal to speak" (Pick, 2011, p. 143); as Pick wrote about Wiseman's film *Primate* (1974), an existential film that shows researchers working with primates, but really asks which ones of these two sets of primates is the more strange or less compassionate: "with no voiceover or interviews—neither a defense nor an assault on the subject of vivisection- *Primate* is the traumatic text par excellence and so belongs, in all its inarticulacy and silence, to the realm of Witnessing" (Pick, 2011, p. 143). As these authors suggest, Wiseman's gaze and positioning towards the real is receptive, and his preferred "dialogic listening strategy" is silence (see the chapter Notes from the field. Towards an exotopic positioning for reference); as Benson wrote: "Wiseman's films do not imply any solution to the enterprise of being human" (Benson in Pick, 2011, p. 144). Even though Wiseman's approach is heavily influenced by the invention of direct-sound microphones, he also willingly rejects the use of voice-over in favor of pure observation, devoid of retrospective commentary; instead, Wiseman privileges the construction of "mosaical collage of stories," as Nichols defined them (Nichols, 2014, p. 129, author's translation); with regards to the narrative construction of films at the editing level, Wiseman's cinema is more polyphonic as it diverges from the preferred chronological structure of traditional american direct documentary cinema, as noted by Pick (Pick, 2011, p. 141).

In light of this, why choose *At Berkeley* (2013) to discuss his exotopic approach? As we will discuss below in more detail, this exceptionally long feature film (244 minutes) takes the time to look at an elite yet publicly funded and well-known American university as it navigates financial and social pressures from multiple points of view, juxtaposing lectures, protests, and administrative meetings in a way that creates a uniquely multidimensional portrait of an institution, seen from both inside and outside. A way to delve into Wiseman's vision is to analyse a specific sequence of the film that displays polyphony and exotopy. A valid candidate is the one showing the faculty meeting, in which administrators and academic staff members discuss how to manage severe budget cuts without compromising the university's mission and objectives, showing the tension between financial pragmatism and the ideals of public education. Participants articulate conflicting priorities, such as preserving research

excellence, ensuring access for underprivileged students, and maintaining financial sustainability. Each speaker's perspective comes across as valid within their own frame of reference, but the sequence shows how these perspectives co-exist and co-create meaning through a polyphonic discourse. As much as faculty members are represented as insiders that are engaged in critically examining their institution, Wiseman's external gaze allows viewers to see not only the content of their discussion but also their implicit dynamics, such as power hierarchies and rhetorical strategies. The camera observes the participants of the meeting without intervention, while maintaining a critical distance that puts them at ease and allows them to express their stance with an horizontal acceptance that materialises through the orientation of the camera (the lens is consistently in search of an horizontal axis and a listening distance with respect to the subjects). Giving the illusion of being there for the whole meeting, the editing follows an organic pace and harmonious rhythm, encouraging viewers to become external observers of the meeting and to adopt a neutral and inquisitive gaze, one that seeks to understand the stakes and constraints that may not be fully apparent to the participants themselves. In doing so, it draws attention to the broader institutional mechanisms. As a result, the sequence respectfully exposes some of the routines, rituals, and ideologies that govern contraposing stakeholders at Berkeley; it honours multiple perspectives by avoiding to reduce the institution or any single point of view to a unidimensional stereotype. Throughout the film, by moving between administrative meetings, lectures, protests, and moments of quiet reflection, Wiseman's camera situates viewers outside the immediate concerns of any single group and presents Berkeley as a living, contested space. As Wiseman clarified (Bacow et al., 2014), he did not know much about Berkeley before starting the production of the film, but his deep listening of the various voices involved within the institution made him gain the understanding of an insider; this dual insider-outsider perspective allows *At Berkeley* to transcend the specifics of its setting and of every single perspective of its groups while instead building a larger portrayal that speaks to universal questions about the nature of institutions and their roles in society. Simultaneously, the film's theme mirrors this open approach by exploring issues like social inequality, public education, and the commodification of knowledge, themes that extend far beyond Berkeley itself.

However, this understanding comes through because the sequence does not exist in isolation, but is intercut with scenes of lectures, student protests, and campus life, which contextualize the discussion and allow viewers to see how the decisions made in the faculty meeting ripple across the university, connecting a potentially abstract discourse to tangible and visible

consequences. Thus, to understand Wiseman's approach, one must examine the whole film as well as any single sequence. In Wiseman's words: "the documentary must reflect the complexity and ambiguity of things ... and that it is the totality of the film that represents my point of view on the subject." (Sebag and Durand, 2023, p. 131). More specifically, it is through the editing that Wiseman's take on the real both takes shape, and comes through in an open way for the spectator's interpretation. It does not surprise that, in Wiseman's view, a documentary filmmaker cannot fully delegate the editing of their film to someone else. As Wiseman puts it: "Film editing is the process of understanding the event I filmed. That's why I do it myself. (...) I discover the film while I am editing, and usually towards the end. It takes me eight or nine months to start finding the structure. It's a personal and also intellectual adventure that involves analyzing the sequences. What's going on? What do I see? Why these words, these gestures? Editing the sequences is totally reasoned but in the sense of dramaturgy. If there is no dramatic structure, it is not a film! The structure brings us closer to fiction, in the sense that events are arbitrated, put in order. An order that I choose. It doesn't follow the chronology of the shooting at all." (Sebag and Durand, 2023, p. 134). When it comes to conveying meaning, order is everything. Wiseman's editing juxtaposes scenes in a way that brings themes to the surface while avoiding clear answers. For instance, in *At Berkeley*, budget meetings are followed by lectures on inequality, inviting viewers to think critically about the political and social consequences of seemingly simple managerial decisions. No matter how observational, the film is always to some extent an hypothesis about the real, filtered by the author's subjectivity. As Bill Nichols reports, according to Wiseman "the final film is a theory about the event" (Nichols, 1978, p. 15). As much as it is observational, exotopic and neutral, the film is not an objective document but a subjective take on the real, a proposal. And here lies the ethical responsibility of the author.

With this in mind, we can try to highlight the ways in which an exotopic positioning differs from an empathetic one by looking at some of the reasons why Wiseman's cinema may be perceived by some as "tactless" (Nichols, 1978, p. 16).<sup>105</sup> We have discussed how Wiseman's gaze is in search of a listening distance from subjects. Witnesses are framed in a way that not only avoids any emotional manipulation, but also sentimentality in general: Wiseman does not use close-ups, soundtrack or sentimental framing or editing in a way that draws viewers

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<sup>105</sup> "Titicut Follies"(1976) was even notoriously forbidden from general public distribution in the United States due to a legal injunction issued shortly after its release. The Massachusetts government argued that the film violated the privacy of the inmates at the Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, where it was filmed. The film was released in America only in 1991.

into the personal struggles of individuals. Likewise, no matter how aligned with the director's values, polyphony is often chosen over advocacy. This restraint keeps the focus on systems and interactions rather than fostering personal identification in the viewer, deliberately maintaining an intellectual distance, which can be interpreted as emotional insensitivity rather than necessary detachment. In *At Berkeley*, administrators defending budget cuts and students protesting against tuition hikes are both given space and attention, allowing the viewer to listen to both perspectives, and recognise them for being subjective positionalities that derive from individual opinions, beliefs, values, objectives, aspirations, and so on, rather than truths or absolutely positive or negative perspectives. Beyond any one of his films' specific themes, Wiseman's cinema repeatedly inspires the viewer to shift their awareness, or vision of the real, from being rooted in individual, isolated and ego-centred positionalities, to a new level that stems from a more multidimensional, inclusive and open perspective. What activates this shift is their exotopic filmic form.

## **Conclusions**

*In Vanda's Room* is an intimate, haunting portrayal of life on the margins, combining documentary realism with an artistic sensibility. It is a testament to Pedro Costa's unique vision and his ability to find profound meaning in the overlooked. On the opposite side of the spectrum of documentary forms, stands *At Berkeley*, a mosaic of diverse, and sometimes contraposing perspectives expressing their subjective positionalities with regards to the funding of public education, the sharing of knowledge, and raising students fee.

Both authors engage with social, economic, and cultural power structures, and critically look at systems of inequality or injustice. But what makes these films political? Rancière asks this question in regards to Pedro Costa's cinema, and replies: "neither a social situation nor a visible display of sympathy for the exploited and the neglected are enough to make art political. We usually expect there to be a mode of representation which renders the situation of exploitation intelligible as the effect of specific causes and, further, which shows that situation to be the source of the forms of consciousness and effects that modify it." Pedro Costa's films achieve political significance because they create "spaces of resistance and memory" for historically excluded groups; by rejecting traditional cinematic storytelling in favor of a collaborative, minimalist aesthetic that reflects the resilience of his subjects while critiquing broader systemic injustices, Costa's approach turns his cinema into "a form of historical and social intervention." (Rancière, 2012).

On the other hand, Wiseman enters institutions as an outsider, capturing their internal workings in a way that uncovers their implicit structures, norms, and contradictions in such depth that the final film appears as if it were made from an insider's perspective. Similarly, he makes large use of the listening distance of the camera from the subjects when filming. While maintaining this specific distance, his approach allows viewers to listen to the people and situations depicted, fostering a nuanced understanding of their complexities. Emanuele di Nicola poses the same question in regards to *At Berkeley*. "*At Berkeley* è davvero un film sull'università, come ha notato Enrico Ghezzi, non solo nel primo significato ma anche in senso etimologico: un insieme di persone e cose esplorate nella loro totalità, ovvero una delle totalità possibili ottenuta attraverso quelle singole parzialità (altre ce ne sarebbero, si lascia intuire). E' anche un referto sulla crisi, l'istruzione pubblica che resiste senza soldi, esattamente come resisteva il Ballet de l'Opéra de Paris e il Crazy Horse. E' un film politico in due sensi (ancora): sull'impegno politico, ovvero come rappresentare un interesse comune, e su una politica della visione." (Di Nicola, 2013).

Despite their differences, both directors share a commitment to truth and humanity. Their works reject commercial cinematic conventions, instead crafting open forms that invite audiences to actively interpret and engage. The two films, *In Vanda's room* and *At Berkeley* exemplify not only exotopic filmmaking but also a "politics of vision." Costa's intimate, painterly approach reveals the resilience and struggles of marginalised individuals, creating cinematic spaces that honour otherness while silently exposing systemic inequalities. Wiseman, through his meticulous observational style, illuminates the complexities of institutional structures, presenting a polyphonic narrative that challenges viewers to see beyond simplistic dichotomies. Costa and Wiseman, in their unique ways, invite audiences to rethink their perspectives on society through works that are both a cinematic proposal for engagement and a method of visual and social inquiry.

As these landmark films illustrate, subjectivities exist in dialogue, shaping and understanding objective reality through their shared, co-constructed experience of it. The positioning of these filmmakers in relation to the real suggests that an *exotopic* stance—one rooted in listening—serves as a means to reveal and unravel the complex interconnections at play; to expose and unmask their mystifying powers. As these landmark films illustrate, subjectivities coexist in dialogue, shaping and understanding objective reality through their shared, co-constructed experience of it. The positioning of these filmmakers in relation to the real suggests that an *exotopic* stance—one rooted in listening—serves as a means to reveal and

unravel the complex interconnections at play. Following this process, documentary filmmaking does not cease to mediate both the representation and the construction of the real.

## **Epilogue. In the world, not of it. Documentary as dialogue**

While every form of representation presents ethical challenges, documentary images occupy a particularly complex position at the intersection of ethics, reality, and truth, because of their problematic claim to represent the real. This unique relationship with reality heightens the ethical stakes, as the choices made in framing, editing, and narrating documentary content influence not only the representation of truth but also the lives and dignity of those depicted. The filmmaker's responsibility extends beyond artistic considerations to questions of agency, consent, and power—negotiating the fine line between bearing witness and voyeurism, advocacy and exploitation, representation and appropriation. At the heart of these questions lies the hypothesis of an imbalance of power between the filmmaker and the subject. The filmmaker controls the means of production—the camera, the edit, the distribution—while the subject's agency is often limited to their participation, sometimes under circumstances they cannot fully control. This power dynamic raises critical questions concerning participation and consent, as well as performativity and truth, or the extent to which the presence of the camera alters reality and interacts with the ethical dimension not only of representation but of relationships. In response to these concerns, scholars and practitioners have proposed various approaches to ethical documentary practice; reflexivity, as advocated by Bill Nichols (1991, 2014), called for filmmakers to acknowledge their position in the narrative; participatory methods, such as those explored by Jean Rouch (1973), sought to seek to democratise the filmmaking process by involving subjects in decision-making. Transparency and informed consent have become guiding principles, but even these open questions, particularly in relation to filming the unsettling aspects of the real.

Framing documentary representations as multidimensional objects that simultaneously document and create the real on the basis of eminent reflections on documentary theory and practice (Dottorini, 2019; Bertozzi, 2018; Balsamo and Pannone, 2010), in this work we explored how authors cococonstruct meaning in dialogue with an unstable and responsive real “in becoming” (Hongisto, 2015). Drawing on the concepts of ethical gaze and the dialogical principle (Sobchack, 2004; Bakhtin, 2000; Todorov, 1995), one of the central explorations of this research has been that documentary filmmaking is a fundamentally dialogical process,

one that resists fixed hierarchies between observer and observed. To deepen this argument, we explored Bakhtin's concept of *exotopy*, or *outsidedness* as a framework for understanding the ethical and aesthetic stance of documentary authors in dialogue with the real. Exotopy, as Bakhtin suggests, refers to the ability to perceive and understand another's world precisely because one stands outside of it (Bakhtin, 2000). This outside positioning, however, does not imply detachment or objectivity; rather, it underscores the necessity of a relational distance that allows for meaning to emerge between perspectives rather than within a singular, authoritative viewpoint. A filmmaker who adopts an exotopic stance does not collapse into the subject's experience, nor do they claim to possess an externalised, impersonal knowledge of it. Instead, they cultivate a listening attitude—a term that signifies both ethical attentiveness and an openness to the unpredictability of the real. In this approach, ethical engagement in documentary filmmaking is not only about avoiding misrepresentation, addressing a power imbalance, or searching for non-extractive *ways of seeing*, but also about seeking new ways of relating to the real, given its fluidity and “responsiveness”, or capacity for dynamic interaction, which might leave visible traces in documentary representation.

To develop the concept of an exotopic positioning, we looked at our own experience of filming the real through the making of the documentary films *Aylesbury Estate* (2020) and *Listening Centre* (Work in progress); these reflections focused on the practice, and successive conceptualisation, of an *listening positioning (or exotopic positioning)*. In our approach to filming *Listening Centre*, and to filming and editing *Aylesbury Estate*, the challenge and intention was to establish the filmmaker's presence as an attitude that was not meant to dominate upon the participants but to reveal itself through acts of listening and attunement with the real, in alignment with Nichols' (2014) call for reflexive documentary ethics, wherein the filmmaker acknowledges their position within the social and representational structures that shape the documentary encounter. This attentiveness to both the embodied and situated presence of the filmmaker in the physical and metaphysical space, and the dialogical potential of a dynamic real are central to the exotopic positioning, which is not merely about *hearing* but about structuring the film in a way that allows for responsive and reciprocal engagement. In both works, the filming did not only seek to simply amplify the voices of those depicted in ways that were balanced and consensual, but also to investigate the exotopic positioning as an approach to documentary film as an arts-based research method (Given, 2008; Barone and Eisner, 2012). Building upon Sobchack's concept of the *ethical gaze* (2004) and Cooper's notion of *respectful distance* (2010), an exotopic positioning in

documentary filmmaking materializes through both temporal and spatial dimensions. It emerges from the filmmaker's intentional pursuit of both a *listening distance*—a relational positioning in the physical space that prioritises attentiveness and receptivity over authority, and *relational slowness* through time, which differs from the concepts of *slow cinema* and *delayed cinema* (Flanagan, 2012; Mulvey, 2006), even though it may generate elements that resonate with aesthetical slowness and temporal resistance in viewership.

Challenging observational modalities that assume an omniscient and detached author recording the real behind the filming apparatus, the notion of *exotopic positioning* aligns with forms of filmmaking that acknowledge the impossibility of pure objectivity while resisting the self-centered tendencies of representations that presume to fully know, understand and feel the experiences of the other; similarly, an exotopic positioning expands on participatory documentary by advancing the supposition that a collaborative approach that seeks democratic engagements underestimates the narrative and ethical possibilities of a listening approach.

In exploring the space between the researcher-filmmaker and the field of research through a positioning that is only seemingly passive—a dialogic position of reception and contemplation, this work has sought to identify a number of documentary forms in which authors might have adopted an exotopic stance. These included the work of Humama Hamido, Sara Fgaier, Frederick Wiseman, Raimond Depardon and Pedro Costa, while also tangentially exploring some of the experimental, anthropological and hybrid work of Jean Rouch, Roberto Rossellini, Errol Morris, and Gala Hernandez Lopez, as well as looking at documentary photography, in particular the work of Eugene W. Smith. Through Pedro Costa's *In Vanda's Room* (2000), for instance, we have looked at how exotopy might manifest in hybrid documentary forms. The film, which simultaneously constructs and documents the daily life of Vanda Duarte in the now-demolished Fontainhas district of Lisbon, unfolds through long, static shots that resist intrusion or editorialisation. Costa's methodology involves prolonged engagement with his subjects, often spanning years, allowing for a deeply inhabited representation of their world. However, rather than assuming a facilitating role akin to *cinéma vérité*, Costa remains at the threshold of observation and presence, documentation and staging, an emotional and intellectual attitude that translates into a spatial positioning of listening with respect to the real. His films do not attempt to bridge the gap between subject and filmmaker through direct engagement but rather emphasise the distance that enables ethical forms of relating, and then of representing the other.

Taking a panoramic perspective on documentary forms suggests that it would be reductive to associate exotopic listening with any single documentary school or visual approach. Rather than being tied to a specific cinematic or photographic style, our theoretical and practice-based explorations indicate that a listening positioning arises from a relational pathway centered on exotopy. While exotopy does not conform to a fixed documentary aesthetic, it can nonetheless leave discernible traces within documentary forms. This apparent paradox highlights exotopy as a fluid mode of engagement with the real—one that both includes and transcends the aesthetic dimension of images. By shifting the focus toward the ethical dimension of representation, exotopy opens new avenues for understanding documentary forms, emphasising the quality of human relationships behind representations and the intricate relations that shape documentary images as deeply mediated experiences of the real. Consider for instance how, as discussed, in the film *At Berkeley* (Wiseman, 2013), rather than imposing a predetermined argument, Wiseman's strictly observational approach, rooted in the tradition of American direct cinema, constructs a dialogical space where various perspectives exist in tension, forming a multi-voiced exploration of institutional knowledge and public access. As far as the construction of time in documentary forms is concerned, in *At Berkeley* time unfolds in an accumulative manner, mirroring the actual rhythms of intellectual inquiry, public discourse, and bureaucratic procedure; this commitment to durational engagement aligns with the exotopic positioning in that it requires the filmmaker to structure the filmic time-space in a way that allows witnesses to speak from within their own independent consciousness, which echoes the way *exotopy* functions in literature (Bachtin, 2000).

In this work we have also looked at how documentary forms occupy a unique space in the interplay between ethics and esthetics in nonfictional representation. Whether it takes shape through the horizontal positioning in Smith's work, the observational restraint in Wiseman's films, the deep listening of Hamido, or the synchronic way of framing of De Pardon, form is never neutral—it mediates the co-construction of meaning in representations, while also revealing information on the author's ethical stances, working as a visual map in dialogue with the fluid motives and webs of relationships behind the act of representing. Through the work of these authors, we have explored how documentary images are not only about the world but situated within it, engaging in active dialogue with the realities they depict. By shifting from static representations to relational engagements, filmmakers can foster a more ethical, dialogical approach that resists both extractive storytelling and voyeuristic spectatorship. The question was not just how to see through images of the real but how to

listen through the dialogues they simultaneously represent and initiate. Given these reflections, the ethics of aesthetics in documentary image-making becomes a function not so much of *what* is represented in images of the real, but of *how* it is represented, and *why*.

This approach might provide insights into the analysis of contemporary immersive documentary experiences. Further research could explore how emerging documentary practices, such as interactive and virtual reality documentaries, are reshaping the dialogic potential of documentary forms. Virtual reality projects attempt to place audiences within lived experiences using 360-degree environments to generate empathy through spatial immersion. However, these projects raise important ethical questions about agency, consent, and spectatorship. Unlike documentary cinema, virtual reality documentary places the spectator inside the frame, potentially shifting the power dynamics in ways that require critical scrutiny. Similarly, as documentary filmmaking evolves within the landscape of AI-generated content, the ethical stakes of representation become increasingly complex. The rise of algorithmic curation and automated editing raises questions about authorship, authenticity, and the integrity of documentary evidence. If, as this dissertation argues, documentary is a dialogical act, then these technological shifts demand a reconsideration of what it means to witness, listen, and engage with the real. Additionally, greater engagement with non-Western documentary traditions could expand our understanding of how different cultural frameworks conceptualise the ethics of seeing and representing, bearing witness in documentary, and the exotopic positioning in authorship. In light of these challenges, it might be fruitful to rethink documentary practice as a space where the real is co-constructed through dialogical encounters with the real.

In *showing seeing*, documentary images call for the development of appropriate *visual literacies* (Mitchell, 2017; Cometa, 2020). Likewise, in *showing relatedness*, documentary filmmaking demands an ethical engagement with the real. Ultimately the explorations presented in this work call for the development of a new ethical approach to documentary, one that integrates exotopy and deep listening as guiding principles. In the magnificent words of Simone Weil, true listening requires that we “make silence within ourselves” to open up to otherness from a space free from preconceived notions; in this metaphysical space, the subjectivity no longer sees itself at the centre but rather as immersed in, and engaged with, an ecology of dialogical exchanges that continuously mediate and alter singularly situated and embodied perceptions; as Weil writes: “We lower the spatial form of this illusion to the level of a deceptive imagination. We are compelled to do so; otherwise, we would not be able to

perceive a single object, nor orient ourselves even enough to take a single step consciously. God thus provides us with the model for the operation that must transform our entire soul. Just as from childhood we learn to downscale and suppress this illusion concerning the sense of space, so too must we do the same for the sense of time, value, and existence. Otherwise, we would be incapable, in every aspect except for space, of distinguishing a single object or taking a single step. We exist in unreality, in a dream. To give up our imaginary position as the center, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, that means to awaken to what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence. At that moment, a transformation occurs at the very root of our sensitivity, in the immediate way we receive both sensory and psychological impressions—a transformation similar to what happens when, in the evening, along a country road, we suddenly recognize that what we had believed to be a crouching man is, in fact, a tree; or when, thinking we have heard a whisper, we realise instead that it was the rustling of leaves. The same colors, the same sounds—but we now see and hear them differently.” (Weil, *Attesa di Dio*, p. 118, author’s translation).<sup>106</sup>

A listening positioning configures itself as not only a *way of seeing* or as a way of doing but as *a way of being in dialogue with the real*; as such, it demands openness not only to cognitive adjustments but also to ethical shifts and metaphysical contemplations, such as questioning the perception of separation—of the self as distinct from the other and the real—and reframing it as a fluid state of consciousness that can be subject to changes. From this meditative viewpoint, documentary filmmaking emerges as an ongoing process of

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<sup>106</sup> Translated from: “Noi abbassiamo la forma spaziale di questa illusione al livello di un’immaginazione ingannevole. Siamo obbligati a farlo; altrimenti non potremmo percepire nemmeno un oggetto, non potremmo dirigerci nemmeno quanto basta per poter fare un solo passo in maniera cosciente. Dio ci procura così il modello dell’operazione che deve trasformare tutta la nostra anima. Come fin da bambini impariamo a ridimensionare, a reprimere questa illusione nei confronti del senso dello spazio, così dobbiamo fare per il senso del tempo, del valore e dell’esistenza. Altrimenti saremo incapaci, sotto ogni aspetto, eccetto per ciò che concerne lo spazio, di distinguere un solo oggetto, di muovere un solo passo. Noi siamo nella irrealtà, nel sogno. Rinunciare alla nostra illusione di essere situati al centro, rinunciarvi non solo con l’intelligenza, ma anche con la parte immaginativa dell’anima, significa aprire gli occhi alla realtà, all’eternità, vedere la vera luce, sentire il vero silenzio. Allora si produce una trasformazione alla radice stessa della nostra sensibilità, nella maniera immediata di ricevere le impressioni sensibili e le impressioni psicologiche: una trasformazione analoga a quella che avviene in noi quando, di sera, in una strada di campagna, nel punto in cui avevamo creduto scorgere un uomo accovacciato distinguiamo improvvisamente un albero; o quando, avendo creduto di sentire un bisbiglio, ci accorgiamo che è stato, invece, un fruscio di foglie. Sono gli stessi colori, gli stessi suoni, ma li vediamo e li sentiamo in modo diverso.” (Weil, *Attesa di Dio*, p. 118).

transfiguration—one that, in spite of all, continues to present partial, opaque, and subjectively objective fragments of mediated and co-constructed experiences in dialogue with a real in becoming.

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Colossal Youth (2006) [Film]. Directed by Pedro Costa.

Horse Money (2014) [Film]. Directed by Pedro Costa.

Vitalina Varela (2019) [Film]. Directed by Pedro Costa.

Austerlitz (2016) [Film]. Directed by Sergei Loznitsa.

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# Abstract

In this thesis we explore the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of documentary filmmaking through the lens of *exotopy*—a positioning that foregrounds dialogical engagement with the real. Rather than adhering to traditional hierarchies between filmmaker and subject, an exotopic stance acknowledges the impossibility of pure objectivity while resisting extractive or self-centered representations. Drawing from Bakhtin’s concept of *outsidedness*, Nichols’ reflexive ethics, and Sobchack’s *ethical gaze*, this research has examined how documentary filmmakers can cultivate a *listening positioning*, a relational and temporal approach that prioritizes attentiveness, reciprocity, and the unfolding complexity of the real. Through an analysis of works by Pedro Costa, Frederick Wiseman, Sara Fgaier, and others, this study has traced how filmmakers navigate the tension between presence and distance, shaping their representations through ethically and aesthetically attuned methods. In investigating the dialogical nature of documentary cinema and photography, we propose three interrelated concepts—*multidimensionality*, *synchronicity*, and *exotopy*—to analyse the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of documentary images. It argues that documentary forms are not static representations of reality but dynamic sites of interaction between filmmaker, subject, and audience. The study situates its reflections within the broader framework of visual culture, philosophy, and media studies, engaging with documentary theorists such as Hongisto, Bertozzi, Dottorini, Sobchack, Nichols, and Cooper to address the fundamental tensions between witnessing, representation, and ethics. The research begins by examining the relationship between vision, perception, and documentary representation, drawing on W. J. T. Mitchell’s concept of *seeing through the eye* rather than *with it*. This distinction underscores how documentary images are not neutral windows onto reality but constructed ways of engaging with the world. The study interrogates the implications of image-making in contemporary media, particularly regarding ethical considerations in documentary practice. Arguing that documentary filmmaking operates as a form of dialogue rather than a mere act of recording, it engages with Nichols’ documentary modes and Bakhtin’s *exotopy* to frame the filmmaker’s role as both an observer and a participant in meaning-making in dialogue with a real in becoming. By reflecting on two documentary projects—*Aylesbury Estate* (2020) and *Listening Centre* (ongoing)—the thesis examines how documentary practice can move beyond traditional participatory models to a more reflexive approach. The concept of the *listening gaze* emerges as an alternative to

conventional observational and participatory methods, building on Sarah Cooper's notion of *respectful distance* as a means of ethically engaging with subjects. Through a discussion of Sobchack's *ethical gaze*, the study expands its scope to address the ethical dilemmas embedded in documentary image-making. Ultimately we position documentary as an open-ended, relational, and dialogical forms that are not merely about the world but are situated within it, co-constructing meaning through mediated encounters. By challenging rigid classifications that separate reality from representation, ethics from aesthetics, and presence from distance, it calls for a new paradigm in documentary film analysis—one that acknowledges the polyphonic, exotopic and ever-evolving nature of documentary images. In this sense, documentary filmmaking remains an evolving process—one that, despite its inherent subjectivity and mediation, continues to transfigure fragmented experiences into a dialogical exchange with a real in constant becoming.