

MEDIA FIELDS

J O U R N A L

Spaces of Reticence

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Modern Life (Raymond Depardon, 2008)

I

There are moments in documentary film—conventional and idiosyncratic—when the hesitancy of an exchange can shed light on the entire apparatus of knowledge production we expect of nonfiction cinema. These usually take the form of uneasy silences, ignored questions, vacuous smiles or blank stares. Anyone familiar with the methods of ethnography, oral history or journalism can identify such moments when they appear during the course of a conversation. But they have been given little attention in documentary film criticism. While film is a time-based medium—what Andrei Tarkovsky called “sculpting in time”—I would like to consider these moments differently, asking what spaces they open up in documentary discourse. These spaces of reticence reveal gaps between interview and interviewee, viewer and work that most documentaries are keen to suture over.¹ Space here is less the geography of places or locales, but rather the communicative interactions that make documentary possible to begin with. Though documentary often presents us with spaces of interest and fascination due to the access medi makers have to places, environs and communities with which viewers may be unfamiliar, I want to suggest that we stay alert to meanings of space other than those that index what we can think of as verité geographies. Space is notoriously abstract and expansive, evoking a host of phenomenologies and scales of meaning.² In film, several kinds of space are always in play—diegetic space (the world of the film as story or narrative), visual space (the world of images we are shown), acoustic space (the world of sounds, dialogue, music and speaking), and semiotic space (the world of meanings we attach to the images and sounds we are presented with). The spaces I focus on are those created by the interactive encounters between artist and subject, particularly as rendered in the interview. Yet rather than erecting analytic walls between these differing spaces, instead I purposefully wander around them in my arguments about documentary film and video. In particular, I offer readings of three works—Raymond Depardon’s *Modern Life* (2008), Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville’s *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* (1978) and Abbas Kiarostami’s *Homework* (1990)—that require us to acknowledge distance as a structuring feature of documentary exchange.

In this essay, I use the phrase documentary discourse to refer to the range of rhetorics and modes of address offered by nonfiction media, following Bill

Nichols' nuanced analyses in his 1991 book *Representing Reality*.³ While the rhetorical work of documentary is accomplished through a range of decisions made during production and editing, we should keep in mind Nichols' argument that "the voice of documentary" is not always consciously conceived and storyboarded.⁴ Though we can read documentary as a text like any other, we also have to understand that there are moments when the artist's "voice" gets interrupted, throwing into relief the truth claims she or he is after. In his 1972 essay "The Grain of the Voice," Roland Barthes argues for a reading of musical talent different from conventional celebrations of virtuosity.⁵ He identifies a corporeal presence in music that inaugurates an acoustic desire in the listener, ignoring the logics of sonic perfection. Barthes writes "The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs."⁶ I argue for a similar understanding of documentary discourse as orchestrated but also prone to slippages and gaps that foreground its constructed articulations. In reflecting on works that linger in these awkward interstices, my goal is to shed light on such dynamics as they play out in a range of nonfiction texts and situations. I make the argument that we do ourselves a disservice in taking documentary dialogue for granted—as always good, as transparent, as intimacy itself. A more critical optics would require staying attuned to the power imbalances of rapport, pointing out the edges of the frame that shape even the most communicative of connections. Consider the following then as a series of case studies in limits and liminal spaces.

II

The interview is a key mode of documentary praxis. It is the standard form of talking we encounter in documentary film and video, alongside the snippets of diegetic discourse—conversations, whispers, soliloquies—the artist captures during the shoot. A good interview serves the larger argument around which the work pivots, as Nichols has persuasively argued.⁷ Sometimes the speaking subject is all we are offered, as in *Portrait of Jason* (dir. Shirley Clarke, 1967) or *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (dirs. Mariposa Film Group, 1977). In such cases, the filmmakers have latched onto subjects eager to talk for performative or political reasons, creating the impression of the interview as an expansive space—a world—where subjects can roam as freely as they'd like, aided by the attentive filmmaker. In other instances, that world is less than verbose. Take, for instance, Raymond Depardon's remarkable *Modern Life* (2008). An examination of farming life in the Cevennes region and the third installment in his *Profils Paysans* series,

the film revolves around a series of conversations with his rural French subjects. Situated safely outside of the camera's view—we only ever hear the filmmaker in adjacent, off-camera space—Depardon renders the interview as fragile form. In several long, almost epic, takes, Depardon poses queries while his interviewees respond with polite reserve. It is a testament to Depardon's skills that he lingers on the drawn-out, plodding nature of these conversations. The interviews in *Modern Life* pay homage to the art of portraiture, offering the viewer a posed version of reality buttressed by the frontal, face-to-camera orientation of several sequences. Depardon's interviewees exhibit an ostensible willingness to speak with him. Yet this willingness is conveyed with an acute deference that holds back as much as it shares, underscoring the unnatural tenor of these exchanges. A space of reticence is thus revealed. And in those pauses and blank stares, documentary discourse is temporarily halted, forcing the viewer to consider other spaces at work. Where is the artist exactly? Where are we? What arrangements—of furniture, people, schedules—have taken place in order to render this conversation? What distances—social, economic, geographic—remain despite the filmmaker's reasonable rapport? Why am I sitting here watching such awkwardness? These are estrangement effects, not consciously conceived or planned for, but nonetheless reflexive in a way that Dana Polan has argued in relation to a different set of texts.⁸

Contrast Depardon's vision with that offered in Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville's *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* (1978), a series of twelve half-hour videotapes originally made for French television. Godard and Miéville's project is deceptively simple—interview two youngsters in order to understand and unlock the myriad ways children are socialized into modernity. Mimicking the conventions of broadcast television, at the center of each "episode" are the interviews Godard conducts alternately with our two young protagonists, Camile and Arnaud, who function as each segment's native informants. Many of the questions start off with simple queries about the differences between night and day, or home and school, but quickly shift into epistemological interrogations—such as "Do you think you have an existence?" and "What does revolution mean to you?"—that leave our young interviewees visibly squirming. Godard and Miéville's tactics are purposefully manipulative. What better way to expose the limits of documentary truth than the guarded responses of two children? Unlike the speaking subjects of most documentaries, Camile and Arnaud are deployed toward the service of an argument about the impossibility of cinema vérité. Though *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* offers a cat's cradle of telling

slippages, the game is already rigged in Godard and Miéville's favor. Their critique is well taken—Godard and Miéville's denunciation of documentary makes visible the seams of an ethnographic encounter often erased in the editing room. Here the play is reserved for the adults, while Arnaud and Camile are left to wiggle uncomfortably through a televisual space not of their own making.

III

If the positions of Godard and Miéville render documentary untenable, Abbas Kiarostami will offer another set of problematics. Recognized for films that hover at the margins of fact and fiction, in much of his early work children figure centrally, their vulnerabilities depicted with bittersweet intimacy.⁹ In *Homework* (1990), Kiarostami's sympathy is rendered through a distancing logic similar to the terrain covered by Godard and Miéville. In the beginning of the film, via voice over, he describes how he became interested in homework as a social phenomenon, based partially on his own experiences as a parent. As he intones with ethnographic directness, evoking Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's project in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), "...it's not a movie in the usual sense—it's research." As in his earlier *First-Graders* (1984), Kiarostami gives us glimpses of children's ordinary routines at school. The film's opening shots of groups of boys shouting at the camera as they arrive for class in the morning conveys the affection the filmmaker has for his young subjects. They pose and talk back to the camera, asking the filmmaker pointedly what kind of film he is making, to which Kiarostami offers obliging responses. Once inside the confines of the school proper, the playful posing disappears and his youngsters enter the space of conventional confession.

Unlike *First-Graders*, Kiarostami dispenses with creating a diegetic stage for his interviews. Seated behind a simple desk, Kiarostami takes up the position occupied by the sympathetic principal of his earlier film. The eagerness with which his subjects are figured in the opening shots quickly dissipates the minute they enter the space of interrogation he has constructed. One by one, children file in to answer questions and offer up a laundry list of affronts to their sense of justice. As with Miéville and Godard, reticence here is a function of the power imbalances of age, but Kiarostami literalizes the distance Miéville and Godard point to discursively. Between shots of the children framed against one of the room's walls are those of Kiarostami, hiding behind dark sunglasses, with his crew situated behind him. Here he opts for reflexive minimalism, constantly cutting back and forth from the

children (in police lineup formation) to himself (surrounded by crew, camera, light stands and microphones). The children are all filmed in medium shots from the waist up, frontally situated towards the viewer as Depardon's subjects are. A camera and a cluster of crew members opposite them, safely ensconced by their director, is all the children are given in the way of a world. That Kiarostami is seated while the children stand reinforces his positioning as aloof ethnographer, auteur and child psychologist all at once. While his queries are empathetic and gentle, the film's spatial fortifications engender deep distrust. In *Homework*, we see how the orchestration of profilmic space renders reticence the only available option for our youngsters. Kiarostami easily could have decided to query his subjects on the playground or at home, attempting—like Depardon—to mitigate one kind of distance. And herein lies the crucial difference that makes dialogue possible in documentary: you have to meet your subjects half way. In his essay "Beyond Observational Cinema," David MacDougall suggests a participatory cinema can emerge from the abandonment of omniscience in ethnographic film.¹⁰ The ethnographic endeavor necessitates entering into the worlds of your subjects in order to better appreciate their version of everyday life. A good documentary filmmaker will follow suit. Though the truths captured are inevitably partial, the movement away from the artist's comfort zones is what the documentary captures in its most evocative instances. Once the filmmaker has demonstrated a willingness to meet his or her subjects where they're at, jointly sharing space for a time, collaboration becomes possible. Not always rich with rapport or affective connection. But possible. *Homework* reveals a differing logic in which children are good to think with—as ethnographic objects, not collaborative subjects. The obvious terror with which these pupils look into the camera underscores the unreal profilmic space into which they have been asked to enter. The words of Michael Podchlebnik, one of the Holocaust survivors Claude Lanzmann interviews in his epic *Shoah* (1985), ring achingly true: "What do you want me to do...cry?"¹¹

IV

"So what do you want from us here?" is the pointed query that opens the first chapter of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff's *Number Our Days*.¹² In her moving account of life amongst elderly Jews living in Venice, California in the 1970s, readers learn of the crucial questions that informed her pursuit of a community culturally familiar to her—"I had made no conscious decision to explore my roots or clarify the meaning of my origins...At first I planned to

study elderly Chicanos, since I had previously done fieldwork in Mexico. But in the early 1970s in urban America, ethnic groups were not welcoming curious outsiders, and people I approached kept asking me, 'Why work with us? Why don't you study your own kind?'"¹³ As critics we need to take seriously the politics of location posed to Myerhoff, examining the emplaced exchanges that occur in all nonfiction media. Such work need not lead to a nihilist disavowal of documentary writ large. Rather, it suggests important spaces of reflexivity worth defending against positivist incursions. In this regard, I think of these spaces of reticence as also spaces of refusal, where documentary subjects point toward the limits of treating the world as one long, freely flowing conversation. I have deliberately chosen reticence as my preferred way of thinking about these dynamics, tempted though I was by the title "Spaces of Refusal." Refusal is a poetic word, but it evokes a clear gesture of resistance, like the crowds of protesters moving against riot police in Chris Marker's *A Grin Without a Cat* (1977/1993). Reticence is a more apt way to talk about the kind of nervous, polite, affectless refusal we more commonly encounter in documentary praxis and everyday life. I am taken back to Heddy Honigmann's *The Underground Orchestra* (1997), a film about immigrant musicians who play the subterranean network of the Paris subway. Honigmann wonderfully shows us a range of players and performers from Bosnia, Venezuela, Zaire, and elsewhere, but I continue to be struck by the small family of Romanian musicians she is unable to interview successfully. Despite her best efforts to establish rapport, her would-be subjects are clearly unenthusiastic about the prospect of dialoguing with her. We would do well to take seriously the stoic silence of these urban troubadours. Refusal may be as important to documentary praxis as the interviews and moments we capture in sound, image and text. Spaces of reticence remind us that we are always already on someone else's turf.

Notes

- 1 For an analysis of the work of suturing in narrative film, see Kaja Silverman, "Suture," in *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 194-236.
- 2 A full consideration of its myriad renderings in philosophy, geography and cultural studies is outside the scope of the present essay. See Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1988); Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

- (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1991); Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); and David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) for further analyses.
- 3 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
 - 4 Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 36 (1983): 17-30.
 - 5 Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 179-89.
 - 6 Ibid, 188.
 - 7 *Argument* is Nichols' phrasing for the rhetorical work of documentary. "Documentaries, then, do not differ from fictions in their constructedness as texts, but in the representations they make. At the heart of documentary is less a *story* and its imaginary world than an *argument* about the historical world" (*Representing Reality*, 111). For further elaboration, see Nichols, "Telling Stories with Evidence and Arguments" in *Representing Reality*, 107-33.
 - 8 Dana Polan, "A Brechtian Cinema? Towards a Politics of Self-Reflexive Film," in *Movies and Methods Volume II: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 661-72.
 - 9 It is worth noting that Kiarostami received financial support from the Tehran-based Kanoon Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults for his early efforts.
 - 10 David MacDougall, "Beyond Observational Cinema," in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), 109-24.
 - 11 The actual words the viewer reads in English subtitles are "What do you want him to do...cry?" Lanzmann conducted many of his interviews through a translator, owing to the range of languages spoken by survivors. I have taken the liberty to render the subjective "I" in Podchlebnik's statement though the viewer reads it as a third person "he."
 - 12 Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980).
 - 13 Ibid, 11-12.

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