

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## On Ethics and Documentary: A Real and Actual Truth

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*This article brings recent psychoanalytic theory to bear on contemporary moral opinion about ethical practice in documentary film and video. A critical distinction is made between ethics and morals, and Alain Badiou's (1993/2001) philosophical conception of an ethic of truths is used to challenge the restrictions put upon documentary. It is argued that visual perception remains the truth of any documentary, and three modes are proposed according to which an ethic of disclosing this truth may be practiced with a view to overcome the obstacles of morality-based ethical systems.*

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If media theorists were to agree that the concept of *truth* remains at the heart of contemporary debates about ethics in documentary, then perhaps we would do well to identify at least one truth about this enterprise: the perceptual structure of the visual mode of address. If anything is true about documentary, it is the role played by vision as a mediate between the real and reality. Obviously, if there were no visual mode of address, then there would be no documentary, because there would be nothing to see. This truth about documentary therefore presents an ethic to be practiced. This ethic, however, is of a kind that is not based in opinion, journalistic codes, or moral consensus about what is good and what is evil. The ethic proposed in the present article is, in short, an ethic without morals. It consists of an act, based formally on a decision for or against disclosing the role of visual perception in the construction of documentary images.

The first section of the article begins with a critical, conceptual distinction between *ethics* and *morals*, paying particular attention to the practical consequences of failing to differentiate ethical decisions from moral judgments. In opposition to the restrictive nature of ethical systems confounded by moral imperatives, I propose instead an ethic (not ethics) of truths. Drawing on the psychoanalytic theory of Badiou (1993/2001), I define real and actual *truths* as singular and specific to a given context, a matter neither of essence nor of universal moral code. In the second section of the article, the truth of documentary—its perceptual mode of address

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or what I call the “vision of documentary”—is shown through phenomenological analysis. Showing the phenomenality of the perceptual mode of address secures philosophically the common sense idea that truth in documentary is always a matter of perspective. In the third and final section of the article, I outline how an ethic of truth can be practiced in documentary according to three modes: (a) doubling the visual address, (b) redoubling it, and (c) maintaining what Badiou calls “consistency” in this ethic. With these three modes, an ethic of truth offers media theorists an opportunity to rethink the kinds of restrictions currently put upon documentary practice by morality-based ethical systems.

### **Ethics and documentary: state of the current situation**

Contemporary debates about ethics in documentary may be broadly characterized by an impasse concerning individual rights.<sup>1</sup> Put simply, ethics become a question in the enterprise of documentary only when the expression rights of a filmmaker intersect with someone’s right to privacy, right to information, right to be free from slander, and so on. Recent literature on ethics and documentary identifies three main ethical problems in this regard. First, although documentarians have the right of artistic expression, media critics argue that the rights of participants ought to be protected in the process of representation. Characterized as a problem of “participant consent” (Gross, Katz, & Ruby, 2000; Pryluck, 1988), ethics in this case are measured by the degree to which an “image maker” discloses his/her intentions so that participants may decide willingly to consent to the project based on an informed understanding, thereby avoiding victimization in the process. Second, although documentarians may be free to represent people and events, media regulators believe that this enterprise must nevertheless remain socially responsible. Characterized as a problem of the “audience’s right to know” whether a text is representative of what it claims (Winston, 1988, 2000), it is the ethics of journalism that shape public expectations about integrity, fairness, and good taste in documentary. Third, although most critical theorists today will agree that documentary is not journalism, there remains among some currents of social science an unwillingness to recognize the relations of power established by the positivist nature of the visual mode of knowledge production. Characterized as a problem of “objectivity” (Nichols, 1994; Ruby, 1988a, 2000), contemporary ethical discourse in this case serves to destabilize assumptions about the neutrality of the documentary enterprise in its visual representation of phenomena. From the point of view of these three central and related problems—participant consent, the right to know, and the claims of objectivity—debates about ethics in documentary may be understood to have taken shape around a point of incommensurability vis-à-vis the question of individual rights.

Approached from another perspective, it may also be argued that the impasse around which contemporary ethical discourse coalesces has much to do with our ideas about truth. For instance, the problem of objectivity in the context of documentary in one sense or another concerns the idea that the camera *does not lie*, that

there is some kind of essence to any scene that unfolds, and that it is a documentarian's role to capture this scene and bring it to the screen in as unbiased, unfiltered, and truthful a form as possible. Next, the problem of the audience's right to know hinges on the idea that the camera *can lie* and that the truth about issues of public concern may be subject to concealment, distortion, or outright fakery in the illusion created by the image maker. If the enterprise of documentary is legitimated mostly by its claims of representing the real, then audiences will demand to know the facts about what affects them most; in short, we typically believe that it is the job of the documentary to deliver on its truth claims. Finally, the problem of participant consent involves the idea that there is some kind of truth behind the negotiations that lead up to a documentary production, and that participants, save from being victimized in the process, need to be protected from the possible concealment of a producer's intentions and the persuasive strategies of savvy negotiators, as well as from manipulation in the process of production.

Within each of these three main problems, there remains the issue of what truth actually means. For instance, if one agrees with a positivist point of view that an empirically verifiable core of phenomena can be known if one were to use the best scientific methods available to access it, then this sense of truth would seem to be incommensurable with any approach that seeks to balance free-expression rights as they intersect with the rights of participants as well as audiences. Given the explanatory strength of most critical theories of the social construction of reality, many scholars today have come to accept the general argument that no matter how good the scientific methods may be, truth claims can never be fully verified. For the most part, we think of truth not as some real and existent thing but rather as a *relative* matter of how one views the world—that is, as a matter of opinion.<sup>2</sup> Because some opinions or points of view are always more powerful than others, much of social and cultural theory today will not tell us what is true; however, it will tell us what is right. And what is right, we are told, are individual rights.

One of the major consequences of combining a discourse about truth with a discourse about rights, however, is that when the question of ethics is posed, responses begin to sound a lot like moral judgment. As we have already seen, truth is typically defined in the context of documentary as (a) something in the realm of opinion (which cannot be fully accessed), (b) something about which audiences have a right to know (whether or not they ever will), and (c) something on account of which participants may be taken advantage (whether they realize it now or later). When this idea of truth is combined with the idea that audiences have rights (e.g., the right to be told the truth) and with the idea that participants have rights (e.g., the right to be free from misinformation and misrepresentation), what typically happens is that documentarians, as agents privileged in their right to free expression, are held to a *duty* to respect the rights of others, an *obligation* to disclose their intentions and to create unbiased depictions, in short, to “tell the truth.” For example, in his discussion of “ethics” in ethnographic filmmaking, Jay Ruby (1988b) lists what he calls the “moral issues” (p. 310) involved in the production and use of images:

“(1) the image maker’s personal moral contract to produce an image that is somehow a true reflection of the intention in making the image in the first place; (2) the moral obligation of the producer to his or her subjects; and (3) the moral obligation of the producer to his or her intended audience” (p. 310).<sup>3</sup> Winston (2000) has also argued that as the question of ethics in documentary has more to do with the treatment of participants than with media responsibilities to audiences, documentarians themselves should be left to their best “judgments” (p. 132).<sup>4</sup> Because most documentarians already know where to draw the line when it comes to artistic license, Winston argues that “the healthiest position for any reader of, or member of the audience for, mass communications’ messages is an informed, sustained, and profound skepticism,” a skepticism to be cultivated but not formally regulated (p. 155).<sup>5</sup> However, although scholars such as Ruby and Winston have written many authoritative works on the topic, it seems to be the case nevertheless that discourse about ethics in documentary is based largely on a kind of faith: faith that what we see in the documentary image will be a fair and reasonably accurate account of events, faith that participants have been sufficiently informed and understand what they were consenting to, and faith in the laws that protect the individual from defamation, damage, and misrepresentation. So long as documentary is bound to relativist definitions of truth articulated to moral imperatives about individual rights, this enterprise will remain characterized by a weak form of charity whenever the question of ethics is raised.

One of the major issues I wish to address in this context has less to do with how documentarians protect certain rights and has more to do with what they mean by “ethics”. In everyday language, ethics is a term used as if it was interchangeable with morals, even though ethics and morals are not equivalent. In most scholarship on documentary ethics, this sliding between terms is particularly apparent.<sup>6</sup> In order to overcome the ethical impasse in documentary, I propose that media theorists begin to unravel the conceptions we commonly have about ethics, truth, and morals. On the one hand, morals can be defined as an established set of rules and norms, a system according to which judgments about right and wrong are made. In this system, the truth is understood as that which is right, determined as such on the basis of a judgment made according to the rules and norms of a given social field. What is true in a moral system, in other words, is based on a set of beliefs. Ethics, on the other hand, as I discuss at length below, is determined not by judgments made on the basis of a set of known values. Rather, ethics is a matter of deciding for or against what is *not known* or *cannot as yet be recognized* from the point of view of currently available knowledge systems (moral, religious, ideological, etc.). What is not yet known is a truth, and it is with this conception of truth that ethics is properly concerned. To think of a truth as *real*, as something that can be known but as yet remains to be recognized from available points of view, makes the question of ethics a constructive rather than restrictive affair.<sup>7</sup>

As long as we hold to the prevailing idea that a truth can never be known, that any truth is but a construction, discourse about ethics will have no recourse other

than to be based in a discourse about morality—a discourse about duty and obligation that restricts the possibilities of new forms of thought and practice. In the context of documentary, ethics need not be understood as equivalent to morals, just as relativist notions about truth need not continue to restrict creative practice. With a view to introducing new terms into the scholarship about ethics and documentary, the following section of the present article discusses why it is necessary, today more than ever, to separate ethics from morality and to rethink ethical practice on the basis of a productive rather than restrictive notion of truth. Let me turn now to providing some theoretical background to the problem with ethical discourse.

### **Western rights: ethics without morals**

A number of significant works have been written recently in radical opposition to the moralizing nature of contemporary ethical discourse. Major psychoanalytic theorists such as Badiou (1993/2001, 1989/2003), Copjec (1993), Zupančič (2000), Mouffe (1999), Žižek (2002), and others have pointed out that discourses about duty and obligation to individual rights are not as obvious and as natural as we may take them to be. They argue that contemporary ethical discourse can be used as masks for Western, Christian, and capitalist values, the major sources of a moral, ideological consensus about what constitutes right and wrong, good and evil. Offering a provocative and yet philosophically grounded argument against the ways in which ethics are typically understood today, these theorists identify two major consequences of articulating Christian morals and Western capitalist values with a discourse about ethics.

They argue first that basing ethical appeals on quasi-theological definitions of good, evil, and the moral imperative to respect the rights of others leads to a theoretical stalemate on account of the category of *other*. Because each one of us is already other, the theoretical pillars of *difference* and *identity* can at best provide a very weak basis upon which to make ethical decisions. Who is the other? Which other? Who is more other than whom? Who decides? These questions of identity can be answered only by an other who, by definition, is different not only from all others but also from itself. Second, the imperative to “respect all difference” holds the political consequences that only those differences that are the same as Western differences are worthy of respect. To illustrate, one need look no further than current foreign policy in the United States, where differences in the way others rule their lands have been respected only when these others rule by the same difference as pro-democratic, free-market capitalism. When others rule their lands according to differences that differ from the values of this singular difference, actions taken against them can be morally justified.<sup>8</sup> In short, when morals and morality shape contemporary discourse about ethics—an identity-based discourse with a heavy theological accent—the result can be dogmatic, theoretical deadlock, or worse, violence between opposed groups. The growth in popularity of theorizing about ethics, and much of the recourse taken to it by various political activities, has therefore come under serious attack for amounting

to little more than a moralizing orthodoxy, a hardened kind of ideological consensus that restricts the possibility for emancipatory political action, cultural change, or theoretical development. The harshest criticism, and by extension, what stands to redefine the direction of the current theoretical interest in ethics, is the philosophy of Badiou.

In *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (1993/2001), Badiou condemns what he calls the “ideology of ethics,” the tendency in the West to articulate moral concerns for human rights with definitions of evil that serve the interests of capital, a seemingly self-evident connection that works against new forms of political thinking, and prevents concrete decisions being made to resolve situation-specific problems. According to Badiou (1993/2001), the ideology of ethics restricts emancipatory political action insofar as it

[r]etains the idea that there exist formally representable imperative demands that are to be subjected neither to empirical considerations nor to the examination of situations; that these imperatives apply to cases of offence, of crime, of Evil; that these imperatives must be punished by national and international law; that, as a result, governments are obliged to include them in their legislation, and to accept the full legal range of their implications; that if they do not, we are justified in forcing their compliance (the right to humanitarian interference, or to legal interference). (p. 8)

In this contemporary scene, ethics “is conceived both as an a priori ability to discern Evil . . . , and as the ultimate principle of judgment, in particular political judgment: Good is what intervenes visibly against an Evil that is identifiable a priori.” (Badiou, p. 8)

In this manifesto of sorts, Badiou outlines a radically different conception of what ethics might be. To begin, he states unequivocally that “the whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned” (1993/2001, p. 25).<sup>9</sup> With respect to the impossibility of building an emancipatory political program in the face of “universally identifiable” (i.e., popular opinions about what constitutes) forms of good and evil, Badiou’s main argument here is that because infinite human “difference” is simply what there is, the important matter is to begin thinking about the “same” (p. 25). For Badiou, the same is what applies to, and thus holds true, for every member of a specific, concrete situation. As I discuss further below, in any specified situation, there is one truth that is true for all. This means that truths are singular (“true” only in a specific context) and at the same time universal (the “same” for each and every member of the specified context). For any concrete situation, there is, in turn, a corresponding “ethic” (vs. ethics), a singular, site-specific activity. An ethic in this sense consists precisely in acting in favor of the same, a singular truth, by bringing the truth of a specific situation out into the open. In other words, what Badiou advocates is precisely a situated “ethic of truths” in contrast to a universalizing ethics infused with moral imperatives.

On first blush, Badiou's philosophy of ethics might easily be mistaken for promoting an old style of essentialism, a regression in thinking that today may strike most scholars of culture and communication as repugnant. Audacious as it may seem however, Badiou's philosophy accomplishes nothing less than an opening of the limit that has been reached in critical theory regarding questions of representation, subjectivity, politics, and ethics. Badiou's philosophy puts into serious question the moral, ideological basis of current ethical discourse: It aims precisely at positivism's tourist fascination with difference and cultural alterity, where the human subject is often imaged as a poor, suffering victim; it puts into serious question the self-satisfying expansion of Western capitalism cloaked in Christian rhetoric; and most importantly, it works to emancipate political thought from the restrictive nature of contemporary moral opinion.<sup>10</sup> An ethic of truths versus rights, of sameness versus diversity, not only undermines those liberal orthodoxies governed by the interplay of difference and identity, but in doing so, it also presents a rigorous philosophical alternative to the impasse in thinking about ethics sustained by the moralizing majority of most theories of representation and subjectivity in circulation today. In order to begin thinking about ethics in its distinction from morality, a sober consideration of Badiou's notion of truth will prove to be fruitful.

### **A real and actual truth**

In order to be clear about the sense of truth that I bring to bear on the context of documentary, let us look more closely at how the truth is defined in Badiou's philosophical system. To begin, the truth is what holds together a specific set of elements in a given context and configures them in a particular way. Badiou calls this configuration a "situation," a specific arrangement of elements in a specific place and time. In a given situation, the truth is what applies to each and every element included within it. However, the truth remains unseen from the perspective of current knowledge systems within the given situation. Technically speaking, Badiou's notion of truth is derived in part from modern set theory in mathematics and in part from theories of the real in psychoanalysis. In Cantor's set theory, there is the axiom of the "empty set," the rule that in any given set, there exists a subset without content that determines the order of the larger set that includes it. Badiou links this axiom to Jacques Lacan's notion of the real. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the real is that which resists symbolization, and in doing so, it functions as the absent cause of all symbolic practices. The empty set and the real are not, however, simply invisible nonentities. Rather, they "ex-sist" or "stand out" within a specific set or signifying chain, are included as the driving force of the set or the chain and yet are excluded from the symbolic appearance of each.<sup>11</sup> In both cases, the empty set and the real remain the truth of a given configuration of elements as it beats around the bush of what remains to be symbolized.<sup>12</sup> To illustrate concretely what Badiou means by the truth, let us consider the example he provides of the situation of people without citizenship, the "sans papiers" or undocumented aliens.

In Western democracies, the situation of citizenship is determined by an official “count,” a logic of representation by which all members are included in the situation in the sense that they are counted or not. People without citizenship are indeed members of a state (insofar as they are there, laboring), but they are included as such only by their exclusion: They exist, but according to the prevailing logic of representation, they do not count. In this sense, undocumented aliens stand out, constitute a void or absence in the heart of a represented populous. It is the status of the count that illustrates the truth of this situation. The count applies to *every* individual in the situation. Whether someone is officially counted or not (represented, say, in voter registration and rendered subject to the laws and rights of the situation), it is the count that confers upon everyone their very status (as 1 or 0). The count is therefore the truth of the given situation because it is the same for everyone, regardless of their differences. Now, although the count gives the situation of citizenship its shape, is true for each and every element in the situation, *the count itself is not counted*. Like the real or the empty set, the count remains unknown from the perspective of available knowledge in the current situation. In other words, because the count does not count itself, *it is the unseen truth of this situation*. In Badiou’s philosophy, therefore, it is the possibility of bringing this truth into view—of forcing it to be seen against the current configuration of a given situation—that constitutes an ethical procedure through which the situation could be radically transformed. In concrete terms, it is the undocumented alien (“the real and absent cause of a truth” [Badiou, 1989/2003, p. 86]) around which Western democracies are configured (a situation), which exposes the official logic of exclusion (the unseen truth of a given situation of citizenship) and thereby forces a decision to be made (an ethic) to either transform the current state or not: “This is *really* why we don’t count, therefore, why we must count!”<sup>13</sup>

The technical details of his philosophical system aside, the upshot is that Badiou provides us with a theory of truth not based in morals but rather in *logic*. Based on a decision for or against the truth of a specific situation (rather than on a moral judgment about right and wrong), an ethic for Badiou amounts to a logical procedure to transform a situation, to choose to expose (or not) the real and actual truth that current knowledge and opinion does not yet allow to be seen. In this sense, it is only with respect to what is true of a given situation that one can begin to think about an ethic that is not morality driven. As we are concerned in the present article with the question of ethics in documentary, it is this formal feature of Badiou’s philosophy that remains critical: An ethic, properly the so-called, consists of a decision about what must be done in a given context, an act for or against the truth. In the context of documentary, there is indeed a real and actual truth, a truth in Badiou’s sense from which a new kind of ethic can emerge.

### The vision of documentary

What, if anything, is true in the enterprise of documentary? What is true in documentary—regardless of all possible differences in the process of production

(location, subjects, participants, technology, technique), producer (filmmaker, budget, crew), and purpose of the final product (commercial, industrial, educational)—is the visual mode of address. As obvious as this may seem, without an apparatus of perception, there would be no documentary. The *vision*, rather than the “voice” (Nichols, 1985), of documentary remains the same, and thus true, for every documentary. The visual mode of address in documentary may be understood as a truth in Badiou’s sense insofar as it remains largely unseen from the perspective of the onscreen narrative. In order to avoid possible confusion that the truth of documentary film and video is some kind of ephemeral, relative construct, I will turn now to discuss the vision of documentary can be rigorously shown through phenomenological analysis, an analysis that secures philosophically the idea that truth is a matter of perspective.<sup>14</sup>

To begin, the visual mode of address in documentary may be understood to be formally homologous to what in phenomenology is called the “structure of intentionality,” the perceptual process through which phenomena are constituted as meaningful objects of consciousness. As Husserl (1933/1993) described it, intentionality is “the universal fundamental property of consciousness: to be consciousness of something; as a *cogito*, to bear within itself its *cogitatum*” (p. 33, original emphasis). Because every act of consciousness is directed at some object or another, the intentionality of consciousness means that acts of consciousness are engaged in and therefore, are always to be considered as part of, the focus of objects and of their constitutional integration into a world. In other words, because consciousness exhibits a correlative structure between an act of thought (an intention) and the object thought by that action (an object constituted for consciousness), it is on the basis of this structure that the world is made meaningful. As Husserl puts it, “anything belonging to the world exists for me—that is to say, is accepted by me—in that I experience it, perceive it, think of it somehow, value it, desire it” (p. 21). As a method to ground scientific objectivity, phenomenology for Husserl became a study of the invariant ways in which the objectivity of the world is meaningfully constituted against the transcendent background of conscious perception.

In her seminal study of film experience, Sobchack (1992) draws precisely on the thesis of intentionality in order to correlate film, filmmaking, and film viewing.<sup>15</sup> Sobchack demonstrates how in cinema, according to the property of intentionality, perception (making sense) is always mediated by expression (signifying sense) and vice versa (ego-cogito → intentional act → ← intentional object). Insofar as the act of viewing makes possible the mediation of perception and expression in cinematic communication, Sobchack suggests that it is in terms of their capacity as visual agents that filmmaker, film, and audience may be understood to be communicatively and experientially linked (p. 21). Although Sobchack moves beyond Husserl’s phenomenology in order to provide an intersubjective embodied account of film signification, what is most pertinent to my purposes is her conception of what she calls the “visible being” of film (p. 22), that which is constitutive, in the correlative structure of cinematic experience, of a location and directedness of an intending consciousness.

The intersubjective vision of film, filmmaker, and audience is structured and made significant as film experience by what Sobchack calls an “address of the eye” (1992, p. 9). Both a noun and a verb *address* designates a location, as well as an aiming or intending from that location. First, the position of filmmaker constitutes a location or address from which a synoptic view or thematic plan for a film project is articulated.<sup>16</sup> Second, in terms of its presence and activity of perception and expression, a film itself “transcends the filmmaker to constitute and locate its own address, its own perceptual and expressive experience of being and becoming” (Sobchack, 1992, p. 9). Third, from our location and capacity to view a film, spectators are presented with an act of seeing as well as phenomena seen, hear an act of hearing as well as phenomena heard, and feel the motion of movement as well as phenomena moved. As that which constitutes the modalities of having and making sense in cinema, the address of the eye of film “perceives” according to the structure of an intending consciousness: “the ‘I’ affirmed as a subject of (and for) vision not abstractly, but concretely, in lived-space, *at* an address, *as* an address” (1992, p. 24, original emphasis). As the locus of perceptual processes by which objects are intended for and from the location of a self-transcending point of view, the address of the eye in film “expresses both the origin and destination of viewing as an existential and transcendent activity” (1992, p. 25).<sup>17</sup>

Strictly speaking, what is at issue for Sobchack is the reciprocal relation between the active–passive nature of the camera (separation and integration of moments) and the narrative synthesis of the film (editing), articulated in the sequences of the projector. To the extent that this correlation is made possible by the imaginative variations of the intersubjective, embodied existence of the film director, actors–settings, and audience, the upshot is that a film itself “presents and represents acts of seeing, hearing, and moving as both the original structures of existential being and the mediating structures of language” (Sobchack, 1992, p. 11). More than the interactive, imaginative variations performed by all participants who, through the use of camera and projector, stitch themselves into the assemblage of film images, Sobchack suggests that a film is as much a visible object as it is a viewing subject, an “expression of experience by experience,” competent in “perceptive and expressive performance equivalent in structure and function to that same competence performed by filmmaker and spectator” (1992, p. 22).<sup>18</sup> In other words, just as filmmaker and audience are not merely visible objects but also viewing agents, the film itself is much more than a static container of signs. In tracing a trajectory of interests and intentions across the screen, the film itself obtains the status of a signifying subject, bearing sense and producing meaning through the performances of its own subjective vision (p. 23). In this sense, Sobchack’s analysis of the visible being of film firmly establishes the formal homology between the structure of consciousness and the perceptual apparatus of film and video.

Before moving too quickly, it must be made explicit that *perception* in phenomenology is not *representation*, per se. Perception in phenomenology is understood as interaction with the various profiles of an emerging object that acquires identity

when a synthesis of these profiles can be repeated. This synthesis, however, is not representational (à la Kant) because the meaning of the object perceived can be pragmatic for everyday experience, expressive for communicative experience, or symbolic as an artistic creation. However, this in no way compromises the connection I am making between visual representation and phenomenological perception insofar as the visual object of the documentary—as an artistic creation, an act of signification, and/or an element of film experience—is indeed understood as a meaningful object. As with phenomenological perception, a cinematic object acquires meaning from a particular stock of knowledge (cultural background), according to a particular linguistic system (film images as signs), and is synthesized by a particular apparatus (a projection device). Although the experience of any cinematic object is grounded in the correlate of filmmaker–film–audience, it is the viewpoint, visual mode of address, or what I am calling the vision of documentary that grounds all interaction with emergent objects.

In sum, visual representation in documentary, like phenomenological perception, involves (a) retention (objects imprinted on exposed film stock), (b) explicatory conceptualization (the “language” of cinema) and synthesis (projection), and (c) seizing of the percept in relation with its horizons and other percepts (cultural background or film experience). Just as Husserl’s (1933/1993) transcendental background situates the realm of ideality in terms of the a priori correlation of acts–objects, documentary vision does not displace individual acts of phenomenological perception; rather, it deepens the sphere of the self-transcending gaze of cinematic perception in the presence of which any emergent object acquires identity and is thus made meaningful for a cinematic world. Regardless of the differences of producer, process, or product, the visual mode of address in documentary *fixes the condition of possibility for the meaning of and knowledge about all cinematic objects*. Because the address or vision of documentary remains phenomenologically the same for every documentary, *it is therefore the truth of the documentary enterprise*. Without the perceptual structure of the visual address, there would be no documentary. This much is true. Yet, the visual apparatus, as the truth of the documentary enterprise, remains largely unseen. Locating its own address, the visual mode transcends the filmmaker, typically leaving the scene of the screen. In doing so, the truth of documentary remains, more often than not, invisible. It is from the perspective of the unseen truth of documentary, the invisible that is rarely brought to visibility, that an ethic of truth in documentary may be developed.

### **An ethic of truth in documentary**

Having shown the phenomenality of documentary vision, one is immediately faced with a common response to the consequences of this mode of address. Namely, because the vision of documentary is formally homologous to the intentional structure of consciousness, this “egological” mode of representation may readily be charged with “reducing the other to the same” (Levinas, 1987/1993). Although some

scholars of visual representation have pursued a critique of the “totalizing gaze” of documentary (Minh-ha, 1993; Renov, 1993), this kind of argument can have the tendency to restrict, rather than open up, the possibilities for productive approaches to the question of documentary ethics. As I have argued above, there is a twofold consequence of grounding ethics in consensual moral opinion (an opinion that defines human being as Western or as potential victim of evil.)<sup>19</sup> First, the quasi-theological basis of the moral imperative to respect all difference—“Do unto others as you would have done unto you”—can lead to the dead-end of identity politics (“No one is more other, more alien, more deserving than me!”). Second, the role of Western values in securing moral consensus—“God is on our side, evil is not”—can lead to violence morally legitimated in the name of a singular, ideological difference (“Live free or die!”). In the context of documentary, debates about objectivity, misrepresentation, participant consent, social responsibility, and so on—all of which in some sense concern the question of truth—will be restricted so long as identity-based discourses with heavy theological accents continue their moralizing masquerade. To think productively rather than prohibitively about ethics in documentary must therefore consist in recognizing that there is, indeed, truth in documentary and that bringing the truth of this situation into form—acting in favor of it alone—amounts to an ethic that opens concretely onto the impasse in current documentary practice.<sup>20</sup>

As I have shown, the real and actual truth about documentary is its visual mode of address, the perceptual apparatus that remains transcendent to or unseen from the point of view of most screen narratives. Unsymbolized in the cinematic chain, the truth of the perceptual structure of film and video presents the situation of documentary with an ethic *par excellence*. This ethic must be based neither on consensual opinions nor on moralizing conceptions of human being in its victimized state. Rather, in order for universal moral restrictions to be challenged, this ethic must be practiced specifically on the basis of bringing the truth of the situation of documentary more fully into view. Acting concretely in favor of the truth of documentary, by bringing to visibility the visual mode of its address, constitutes an ethic that can be practiced according to three major modes.<sup>21</sup>

First, an ethic of truth in documentary can be practiced by *doubling* the visual mode of address. To the extent that the place of the camera is left conspicuously absent from the scene depicted in most documentaries, doubling it is tantamount to putting the visual mode of address into view, addressing in some way the address of the eye. A doubling of the visual mode of address can be achieved when participants look directly into the lens of the camera or request that the camera be turned off, thereby unconcealing the camera as it mediates reality and the real. The technique of doubling can be seen, for example, when participants actively collaborate with or contribute to the filmmaking process rather than simply allowing the documentation of events they create. This was perhaps Jacques Derrida’s major concern in the making of *D’ailleurs, Derrida (Derrida’s Elsewhere)* (Fathy, 1999). In this documentary, Derrida takes questions about his life and work but all the while refuses to let the camera go unseen. With almost every question posed, Derrida looks directly and

suspiciously into the lens. He answers each question but also adds a comment, a footnote about the role of the camera as it presents his image to everyone who will later come to look at it. Verbally and visually, Derrida doubles the vision of the documentary, states outright that what this documentary claims to present in its visual mode is, in fact, nothing more than an accumulation of traces, traces of the presence of Derrida that will be assembled elsewhere, to appear at a time and place that is yet to come. Audiences will come to look at him, Derrida says, “like a fish in a tank.”

Doubling the vision of the documentary can also be found in those rare instances in which a filmmaker directly addresses the relation of power between him or herself and the participants involved. Examples here include what Ruby (2000) calls collaboratively produced and “subject-generated” documentaries (p. 196), such as *28Up* (Apted, 1985) and its sequels, where characters directly engage the filmmaker on screen, or *Portrait of a Sian Woman* (Marshall, 1979), where the subject of this film directly engages viewers by addressing the camera, or even *Capturing the Freidmans* (Jarecki, 2003), where family members are presented to a skeptical audience, yet are provided the space to recount their version of a sexual abuse scandal. In each case, the truth of the documentary—the structure of visual perception that remains constitutive of the knowledge it produces—is brought to visibility, doubled via footage of participants looking directly into or in some way addressing the address of the camera. To be clear, I am *not* arguing that the truth or authenticity about a particular scene or cultural identity can be had once the camera is put into the right hands. To argue this would be both uninteresting and entirely wrongheaded. What I *am* arguing, however, is that in the few examples named above, the truth of the documentary may be seen in those moments when the visual apparatus is doubled, added to the scene that will forever fail to be fully constituted.<sup>22</sup>

Although critical documentary scholarship may have certainly discussed these techniques in response to the problems of voice, authorship, and power (Nichols, 1985, 1994), my interest in discussing them here is specifically for the truth that they bring to the screen—the truth being, as I have defined it, the visual mode of perception. By doubling the visual mode of address—an ethic of arresting it by putting the presence of the camera squarely into view—a documentary will lose a significant degree of its constituting power. Once it is addressed on the scene that it intends to capture, thereby interrupting the illusion of reality created by the narrative, the visual perceptual apparatus of documentary will itself appear as constituted. It is constituted precisely by the appearance of objects that first give themselves to be seen. In phenomenological terms, the appearance of objects precedes the perceptual mode that comes later to address them, bringing them meaningfully to form as phenomena of consciousness. Doubled back on itself, thus revealing the visual perceptual process of bringing meaning to those appearances, the vision of documentary can in this sense be seen as a receiver, a kind of witness whose capacity is not simply to mirror appearances but rather to reconstruct, recreate, or reconstitute an image of what first gives itself to the visual field.<sup>23</sup>

This brings us to the second mode through which the truth in documentary can be brought to form, the technique of *redoubling* the visual apparatus. Redoubling is analogous to the literary mode of a play within a play or, in this case, the documentary about the making of a documentary. Ruby (1988a, 2000) has written extensively on precisely this technique, calling it “reflexive” filmmaking.<sup>24</sup> The visual mode of address in documentary is redoubled in a work such as *The Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929). Vertov himself appeared in this film not as a star but rather as one part of the overall process of the filmmaking. His intent was to break the illusion created by narrative cinema and to cultivate a sense of filmmaking as a process, a kind of labor. In doing so, *The Man with a Movie Camera* is exemplary of the ethic of bringing the truth of documentary to visibility. Redoubling the visual mode of address by making the film work part of the narrative, Vertov’s ultimate accomplishment was to aid “the audience in their understanding of the process of construction in film so that they could develop a sophisticated and critical attitude” (Ruby, 2000, p. 170). The films of Jean Rouch also exemplify the ethic of redoubling the visual mode of address. For Rouch, the filming of an event took precedent to the event itself; thus, in *Chronicle of a Summer*, Rouch (1961) included himself, his participants, and the filmmaking process on screen to reveal precisely what he was up to. *Chronicle* was precisely that, an account of the filmmaking process that included scenes of participants discussing various aspects of the film footage, thus bringing to visibility the truth of the visual mode of perception typically absent in documentary.<sup>25</sup>

More radically, Jay Rosenblatt’s (1998) documentary, *Human Remains*, exhibits precisely an ethic of redoubling in its exposure of the central void of the visual field. Because there must be a void in the field of images—a gap that separates the real from reality and, in doing so, causes all signifying processes—the practice of holding this void open demonstrates how narrative can never be complete, how no cinematic chain can ever fully symbolize what it claims to see. In the case of *Human Remains*, a film about Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Franco, and Mussolini, the void in the visual field is held open through repeated cuts to black, an editing technique through which the truth of the visual apparatus is brought to form, its absence “symbolized” in the form of a blank screen (Butchart, in press). As a technique of redoubling the visual apparatus, repeatedly cutting to black interrupts the narrative in *Human Remains* in order to indicate the fact that, despite the endless, technological capacity to reproduce a plethora of images, there can be no complete picture, no consensual image of evil that could once and for all resolve the mystery of human malice and thus provide a sense of social harmony.

Ultimately, redoubling the vision of documentary brings the truth of this enterprise more fully into view. It allows us to see, on the one hand, how the objective world appears, confirming the idea that “a scene presents itself.” Here, the perceptual mode of address is a witness, a receiver of what gives itself to be seen. On the other hand, however, redoubling the vision of documentary allows us to see how the world appears not simply as it is but rather as it is perceived. Here, the visual mode of

address, by receiving what gives itself to be seen, plays the role of reconstituting objects to be seen on the screen. Redoubling the vision of documentary by putting the visual mode of address on screen enables us to see both hands at once. Documentary not only receives but also creates; in its creation, however, a scene must first appear to be seen. As an ethic of filmmaking, the act of redoubling discloses the intending function that remains unseen from the point of view of the screen narrative, unconceals the truth about every documentary as the perceptual structure of its visual address.<sup>26</sup> In short, the technique of redoubling allows us to see how truth in any documentary is a matter of perspective.

The techniques of doubling and redoubling the visual mode of documentary address are certainly not new. Indeed, these techniques have been around since the 1920s and were practiced again in the 1960s. However, what is new about my discussion of these techniques is the degree to which we can think of them as they exemplify a situated ethic, that is, as they are motivated formally by a logical decision rather than by a moral imperative. Once we begin to think of and talk about ethics in their distinction from morality, we may begin to appreciate more fully the kind of theoretical advances that have already been made in this direction by some critical documentary scholarship. This brings us to the third mode according to which an ethic of truth can be practiced: the mode of *consistency*. Consistency in an ethic of truths is a formal matter of following through on a decision made. Like Lacan's (1966/2006) famous axiom, "Do not give up on your desire!", consistency amounts to the kind of work invested into discovering what remains to be known about a given situation (whether that situation is scientific, political, artistic, and so on). In the context of documentary, consistency allows media theorists as well as documentarians to explore new views that might be developed once the visual mode of address is brought more fully to form. What these new possibilities might look like simply *cannot* be fully known. Therefore, to claim to have this knowledge, or to dismiss these techniques outright because the possibilities that scholars have seen in them have yet to be realized in the past 40 years, would be to decide precisely against the truth of this situation. It would amount to giving in to the prevailing knowledge systems that characterize the ethical impasse in documentary today.

To be sure, there is a great distance between, on the one hand, identifying the truth of a situation and, on the other hand, speculating that it might be brought more fully into view. This is why consistency is a necessary component in an ethic of truths. In the context of documentary, the kind of work that best exemplifies consistency is the work of Ruby. Since the early 1980s, Ruby has been writing about the benefits of reflexive filmmaking as it relates to "moral" questions in anthropological research. His work provides some of the best discussions of many of the same techniques that I have addressed in terms of doubling and redoubling the visual mode of address. Despite the fact that Ruby's ideas about reflexive filmmaking have yet to be fully realized in the theory and practice of documentary, and despite the fact that, according to his own admission, few scholars have built upon his work, Ruby has nevertheless maintained consistency to the idea of reflexive filmmaking.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, although Ruby has the tendency to talk about ethics as though they are the same as morals, his work nevertheless demonstrates a kind of consistency that exemplifies the ethic of truth about documentary. Because truth in documentary must be pursued without advance knowledge of what it will look like, consistency of the sort that characterizes Ruby's career remains critical for developing the possibilities of new aesthetic forms, as well as new theoretical questions.

### Objections and conclusions

Having outlined the three modes according to which an ethic of truth can be practiced in documentary, an easy objection might be that most documentarians are not in the business of making films about vision and visibility. At best, the most that can be demanded from the documentarian is some degree of recognition that their work is, for the most part, a process of interpretation by a particular filmmaker, about a particular subject, for particular purposes. One cannot expect documentaries to consist of anything less, even if some image makers may still assume that introducing the camera breaks the illusion of the text, that the appearance of the filmmaker is formally intrusive to the unfolding of the narrative, and that "reflexivity" is, to a great extent, redundant as audiences today typically suspend their disbelief in the absolute factuality of the work and focus instead on how a particular subject matter is approached.<sup>28</sup> As Winston (2000) argues, what should be expected of documentary is "insight, not truth-telling defined as a species of impossibly mechanistic, strict observationalism" (p. 155). Fair enough. However, the fact that most documentaries are not in the business of making works about the visual mode of their address, and the fact that this objection can so readily be made, testifies to the fact that the truth of the documentary enterprise remains largely unseen, the visual apparatus that for the most part remains unrecognizable from the onscreen narrative. In this sense, and if we were to follow Winston when he argues that "the documentarist/participant relationship is the ethical key" (p. 155),<sup>29</sup> then the practice of exposing the visual mode of address would challenge fundamentally the moral basis of ethical systems today and thereby largely overcome the current impasse in documentary ethics. There are four ways an ethic of truth can accomplish this.

First, the ethic of truth overcomes the ideal of objectivity in documentary. As argued by much of the critical documentary scholarship noted in the present article, truth in visual representation is understood as that which can be found neither in the "reality" of images rendered nor in the "veracity" of the narrative they seek to tell. If this is the case, then why is it that fiction film, for example, is more prepared to redouble the visual mode of its address than is documentary? It is increasingly common in mainstream film (either in first run or DVD release) to add director's cuts, gag reels, deleted scenes, alternative endings, extended interviews, and so on, footage that puts into question the elaborate illusion achieved by the absence of the perceptual apparatus from the featured narrative. Perhaps, the reason that we see this additional content in mainstream fiction film more than in documentary is due to

the major claim of the latter being somehow more “factual”: To include these additional scenes would put the *raison d'être* of the documentary enterprise seriously into question. Or would it? If documentarians increasingly acknowledge the interpretive nature of their work (as they do when they take recourse to the “consent defense”), then there would seem to be little harm done to the legitimacy of the documentary enterprise by doubling or redoubling the visual mode of its address, that is, by adding visible content that puts the interpretive–creative process more fully into view. Because the only truth of a given scene is the visual mode of address, all a documentary can be evaluated for is whether or not *this* truth was brought into view, doubled, redoubled, or not. As an ethic of truth, bringing the mode of visual perception into view formally exceeds all moralizing judgment about what the documentary did not represent (questions about the veracity of reconstruction) and dissolves the possibilities for theoretical deadlock about what it did represent (the politics of identity). With regards to questions of factuality in documentary, the impasse inherent to this debate may disappear once we recognize that the biggest lie told in documentary is the consistent barring of the visual mode of address from appearing in the visible field.

Second, the problem of the audience’s right to know is accounted for by doubling or redoubling the visual perceptual apparatus. In terms of an objectively presented story, doubling or redoubling the vision of documentary breaks the illusion (as well as the possibility of the claim) of achieving complete objectivity. Having done so, the only thing that can be seen to have *actually* happened will have happened onscreen: the presence of the camera as it mediates reality and the real. In this sense, all that can be known about the truth of a given documentary *is known* insofar as the visual mode of address is somehow included in the picture. Bringing the visual mode of address into view in this way frees the filmmaker from charges of “falsifying the facts.” Once it is seen as a mediate, the visual mode of documentary appears as a witness whose role on the scene is to reconstitute what gives itself to be seen. Because reconstitution, reconstruction, and recreation are all that the documentary can claim, and nothing more, the question of artistic license in the production process becomes more fully justified by this singular ethic. A given documentary is but a depiction, a work reflective of the intentions of the filmmaker rather than of an available real. To the extent that filmmakers employ technological apparatuses in order to accomplish the activity of visual perception, an ethic of truth in documentary would be restricted neither by consensual ideological values (one’s “right” to know) nor by moralizing judgments (whether or not the camera “lies”). Rather, when it comes to the question of ethics, the truth in documentary can be measured formally only by the extent to which a filmmaker puts the visual mode of documentary address more fully into view.

Third, the problem of participant consent becomes much less vexed with an ethic of truth. The act of bringing the visual mode of address to visibility in documentary amounts to a disclosure of the facts that (a) the world appears not as it is but as it is perceived; (b) the enterprise of documentary involves image-making apparatuses,

a structure of perception that depends for its content on the prior appearance of worldly phenomena; (c) the process of assembling images is an interpretive process of bringing meaning to the scene recorded; and (d) the story that images tell will remain archived for a time to come. Participants would thereby be better endowed with the capacity to recognize the only truth about a given documentary: the role of visual perception as it renders a scene. Because one cannot fully predict the reception of the final picture and therefore the degree to which participants will look favorably on their involvement, *the only truth to be disclosed is the presence of the camera*. If it is, then the ethic of this truth eliminates speculation about, for example, the staging and filming of a particular scene without participant consent, as well as manipulation of the illusion created onscreen. When the visual mode of address is disclosed, which amounts to a disclosure of intent (insofar as the perceptual apparatus exhibits the structure of intentionality), charges of misrepresentation are also virtually impossible to sustain. In an ethic of truth, participants may therefore be understood as strong subjects rather than as victims in need of charity.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, the notion of consistency in an ethic of truth formally distinguishes ethics from the universal aim of morality. If truth can be thought of as something site specific, and yet no less real and actual, then an ethic can be practiced on the basis of that specific truth, as an action aimed concretely at transforming a given situation. Winston (2000), however, argues abstractly that documentary filmmakers “do have, in effect, a duty of care to those who participate in their programs and this, not an amorphous ‘truth-telling’ responsibility to the audience, is where their ethics should be grounded” (p. 5).<sup>31</sup> In terms of what I have been saying about the site specificity of truths, however, Winston’s universalizing claims could not be further off the mark. To presuppose that one has a “duty of care” is, once again, to confuse ethics with morals, to be motivated by the moralizing authority of ideological opinions about what constitutes good and evil. Discourses about duty and obligation, rather than doing the work of emancipation they intend to, actually end up reinscribing precisely the image that is already prevalent in documentary: the image of human being in its biological, animal substrate, the poor and suffering beast in its victim status.<sup>32</sup> A duty of care—“sympathy,” in other words—immediately rules out the possibility of a situated ethic. Were ethical discourse about documentary to be concerned less with following the blind march of moral imperatives, and more with acting on the conditions of a given situation, then perhaps participants of documentary would be allowed to imagine themselves as something more than victims. In this sense, perhaps the most important aspect of ethics in documentary is precisely a “truth telling,” a symbolic inscription—doubling, redoubling, and consistency—of the only truth that remains unseen from the perspective of most documentaries today.

In sum, an ethic of truth offers media theorists the opportunity to rethink how documentary film and video can be practiced without the interference of morally restrictive “ethical systems.” To be sure, were this kind of ethic to be practiced, there would always remain questions about the veracity of the screen narrative, the authorial power of the documentarian and the circumstances that brought participants to

consent to the project. However, there can be no question that without real and actual acts of perception, there would be no documentary; thus, the question of ethics would simply dissolve. Because the truth in every documentary is the structure of visual perception, there is thus an ethic of this truth to be practiced, a decision to put into view the vision of documentary.

## Notes

- 1 What I mean by impasse is not a case of simple failure. Rather, by impasse I mean a point of opening from which a subject can emerge. In this case, if it were not for an impasse between expression rights and the rights of a person to be free from misrepresentation, the subject of ethics would not appear.
- 2 With regards to film and video, Ruby (2000) argues that “[f]ilms by woman/native/Other, documentaries that are cultural studies, feature fiction films, and ethnographic films all offer distinct ways of representing a culture. No one way has an inside track on the truth. All suffer from the limitations of being from a particular point of view. To confuse one with the other inhibits critical discourse about all of them” (p. 32).
- 3 Ruby (2000) updates this list with a fourth moral issue: “The producer’s moral obligation to the institutions that provide the funds to do the work” (p. 140).
- 4 According to Winston (2000), documentarians need not be told that passing fiction off as fact, while rare today, presents an open and shut case about the ethical problems involved (p. 132). However, media audiences, media regulators, and some media scholars have a more difficult time understanding the ethics of documentary than filmmakers because, as he argues, (a) there are no clear conceptual boundaries between documentary and journalism, (b) journalistic responsibilities to audiences have been inflected with conceptions about documentary responsibilities to participants, and (c) the idea that the camera doesn’t lie remains culturally entrenched (p. 132). It is to these explaining issues, and therefore cultivating a clearer sense of them for media audiences, critics, and regulators, that Winston has addressed his research.
- 5 Ruby (1988b) makes a similar kind of appeal:  
We should not let the rush of the marketplace destroy our responsibility to act intelligently. We must demystify these [imaging] technologies so that we can cultivate a more critical and sophisticated audience. We need to make it possible to include a greater variety of human experience via these media—to give the many voices available access to this revolution. The human condition is too complex to be filtered through the eyes of a small group of people. We need to see the world from as many perspectives as possible. We have the means to do so now. (p. 318)
- 6 A quote from Ruby (2000) captures the tendency of some scholars to talk about ethics in documentary as if it were the same as morals: “In this chapter I contextualize the *ethical issues* surrounding the production of ethnographic film by discussing the larger *moral questions* that arise when one person produces and uses a recognizable image of another” (p. 137, my emphasis). Or again: “If documentarians choose to regard themselves as artists and are so received by the public, conventional wisdom argues that their primary *ethical obligation* is to be true to their personal vision of the world—to make artistically compelling statements. In this way, artists are thought to fulfill

- their *moral responsibilities* to the subjects of their work and to their audiences” (p. 143, my emphasis).
- 7 For the purposes of my argument, I will be using theories about truth, the real, reality, and ethics as advanced by recent psychoanalytic theory.
  - 8 Official discourse about the “war” in Iraq exemplifies this problem insofar as a unilateral maneuver, motivated in large part to secure economic interests, has been cloaked in Christian discourse of “liberation” of a people from human rights violations. From this perspective, we are told, the only thing morally more justifiable than the death of Iraqi civilians is the sacrifice of American soldiers on the Altar of Freedom.
  - 9 Badiou (1993/2001) states further, “The ethical conception of man, besides the fact that its foundation is either biological (images of victims) or ‘Western’ (the self-satisfaction of the armed benefactor), prohibits every broad, positive vision of possibilities. What is vaunted here, what ethics legitimates, is in fact the conservation by the so-called ‘West’ of what it possesses. It is squarely astride these possessions (material possessions, but also possession of its own being) that ethics determines Evil to be, in a certain sense, simply that which it does not own and enjoy” (p. 14).
  - 10 As Badiou (1993/2001) states, “[E]very truth ... deposes constituted knowledges, and thus opposes opinions. For what we call *opinions* are representations without truth, the anarchic debris of circulating knowledge. [...] Opinion is the primary material of all *communication*” (pp. 50–51, original emphasis).
  - 11 Lacan’s notion of “ex-sistence” is drawn from Heidegger (1927/1962). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger provides an analysis of the structure of being, an interpretation of *Dasein*. Literally translated as “there-being,” *Dasein* presents itself as unique among beings, standing out as a region or clearing. Heidegger designates this standing out ontologically as ex-sistence, the sticking out of the clearing of being.
  - 12 Although the complete technical details of Badiou’s use of set theory matter little for the broader argument I am presenting in this article, the reader may desire further explanation. For Badiou, mathematics is the language (or the “thinking”) that stitches together what remains of being (what psychoanalysis calls the real) once all qualities have been removed (or accounted for through symbolization). Although one cannot “see” this remainder or pure being which holds together a given set of elements, it is set theory that offers a material means to account for the way these elements are related through pure difference. Explaining the pure being of that which ties a structure together, Badiou’s (1988/2006) mathematic ontology ultimately exposes the “secret” of Derrida’s *différance*.
  - 13 The careful reader will here recognize that the question remains as to how one could possibly identify the truth of a given situation if a truth is impossible to know from the perspective of available knowledge. Practically speaking, this should not trip us up. For example, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld spoke precisely about this problem in his account of the possible existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. He stated, “There are things we know that we know ..., things that we know we don’t know ..., and things we don’t know we don’t know” (or, don’t yet know). In his reading of Rumsfeld’s statement, Žižek (2004) suggests that the crucial fourth term missing from this list is “things we do not know that we know,” the “unknown knowns” (p. 9). The unknown knowns are those unconscious, disavowed beliefs that we are ourselves unaware of adhering to: We do not really know why we do the things

we do, but we do them nonetheless. Mr. Rumsfeld may not fully know why he approved the invasion of Iraq, but he did so anyway. The truth, as yet unknown, must be thought outside consciousness; it must be a matter of unconscious thought. According to Badiou (1989/2003), the answer to the paradox about a truth unknown can be supplied by supplementing psychoanalysis with mathematics because “[mathematics] is the thinking which has no relation to reality, but which knots letters and the real together” (p. 88). In other words, the truth about Rumsfeld’s political decisions could be known through a lengthy course of psychoanalytic therapy.

- 14 Readers who may be less interested in the more technical aspects of how the vision of documentary can be shown phenomenologically may wish to leave this section for the moment, in order to follow the main argument as it is picked up in the next section.
- 15 Nichols (2001) calls this correlation the “triangle of communication” (p. 61).
- 16 Sobchack defines a filmmaker not in terms of an individual creator but rather by the force and collection of all persons who work to make the film into a visual object.
- 17 Cf. Dziga Vertov’s *Kinok* manifesto (1929): “I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it. Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then far away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them. I move apace with the muzzle of a galloping horse. I plunge full speed into a crowd, I outstrip running soldiers, I fall on my back, I ascend with an airplane, I plunge and soar together with plunging and soaring bodies. Now, I, a camera, fling myself along their resultant, maneuvering in the chaos of movement composed of the most complex combinations” (quoted in Ruby (2000), p. 197).
- 18 This recognition is possible once we understand that a film localizes or centers the exchange between the subjective perception of the camera and the objective expression of the projector, thereby making visible the mediation between “the perceptive language of the film’s expressive being (the prereflective inflection of its ‘viewing view’ as the experience of consciousness) and the expressive being of its perceptive language (the reflection of its ‘viewed view’ as the consciousness of experience)” (Sobchack, 1992, p. 27).
- 19 The general conception of the human subject as pathetic, weak, and suffering posited by contemporary ethical discourse is, according to Ruby (2000), the subject of most documentary film today: “Ethnography and the documentary film are what the West does to the rest of humanity. ‘The rest’ in this case are frequently the poor, the powerless, the disadvantaged, and the politically and economically suppressed. An anthropology of the rich and the powerful or even the middle class is as sparse as documentary films that deal with this subject. The exotic and the pathological remain the focus of most social science and documentary film.” (p. 168; cf. Winston [1988]).
- 20 “The ethic of truths aims neither to submit the world to the abstract rule of Law, nor to struggle against an external radical Evil. On the contrary, it strives, through its own fidelity to truths, to ward off Evil—that Evil which it recognizes as the underside, or dark side, of these very truths” (Badiou, 1993/2001, p. 91).
- 21 To be clear, when I say that there is truth in documentary, I am not saying that there is some kind of essence or foundation that remains the same for eternity. As we know from Derrida (1972/1982), there can be no absolute origin, no transcendental signified, upon which to ground an ethics or a politics. However, what we know from Badiou (1993/2001), via Lacan (1966/2006), is that for an ethic to be successful, one must begin

- somewhere. In order to arrive at this somewhere—this “sum”—one must first perform a subtraction,  $n - 1$ . That is, once everything has been said about ethics and documentary, one must look to what remains unsaid, what cannot be put into words. This unsaid is what I am calling “truth.” Something must be done, here and now, in the current situation of documentary apropos of ethics. With regards to theories of visual representation, it is clear that moral discourse does not bring us very far along. In order to overcome the impasse in thinking about ethics in the current situation of documentary, we might begin to think about what affects each and every one in that situation and what remains the same after all the differences (in production, product, purpose) have been subtracted. In this situation, what remains the same after all differences have been subtracted is the visual mode, largely unseen, of all documentary film and video. This remainder is not some mystical negativity, some transcendental nonentity (like Derrida’s *différance*). Rather, this remainder, a phenomenon, is largely unseen, one whose possible existence is proven by the potential its appearance holds for the transformation of thinking about ethics in the current situation of documentary.
- 22 An example that demonstrates how the ethic of doubling *is not* practiced is the documentary *Warrior Marks* (Parmar, 1993). In the opening scenes, the cocreator of this film faces the audience and speaks of a childhood trauma that left her blind in one eye, thereby restricting her capacity to see. Although this may appear as a moment of doubling, the view from this documentary is, in fact, put into view only for the purpose of marshaling authority to identify participants as the same as the filmmaker. Walker states in the opening of the film, “It was my visual mutilation that helped me ‘see’ the subject of genital mutilation.” Beyond this biographical introduction, the power of the visual apparatus, bolstered by the conceit of quasi-theological values from the West remains absolute: the “I/eye” of the documentary grants meaning to its others through its own viewing signification (reduces them to what it knows of itself). In doing so, the visual power of the film is not put into question by the appearance of its others, the subjects of “genital mutilation.” Rather, the film obtains its right to see in light of itself, constitutes its others as marked by the same trauma that defines the horizon of its own Western, moralizing self-presence.
  - 23 For further discussion of the question of how phenomena give themselves, the question of the “gift,” see Marion (1997/2002).
  - 24 According to Ruby (2000), “being reflexive means that the producer deliberately, intentionally reveals to his or her audience the underlying epistemological assumptions that caused him or her to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, to seek answers to those questions in a particular way, and finally, to present his or her findings in a particular way” (p. 156). Apropos a new ethic of documentary, the “particular way” is the visual mode of representation, the one and only truth in documentary. It must be noted that the main difference between reflexive filmmaking and what I am calling an ethic of truth is that Ruby’s notion, as an ethical practice, remains intimately bound up with moral imperatives. See the discussion above for the list Ruby provides of moral obligations.
  - 25 It must be noted that fiction films about moviemaking and moviemakers would not all qualify as an ethic of redoubling. Techniques such as using the first-person narrative (as in Truffaut’s [1973] *Day for Night*), filming the process of filmmaking (as in Antonioni’s [1975] *The Passenger*), or having filmmakers themselves appear in

the film, as in *The Player* (Altman, 1992), are techniques employed either to make the problem of filmmaking an object of entertainment or to engender star status to the filmmaker. A film such as *American Movie* (Smith, 1999) presents a more complicated example. In this film, a crew documents the various challenges faced over a three-year period by Mark Borchardt, an underemployed, drug-abusing “slacker” in his amateur attempt to make an independent horror movie. Although *American Movie* sets out to document the process of fiction filmmaking and, in doing so, reveals its own visual mode of address, the major premise of this film is nevertheless disingenuous. The real story was Borchardt, the star of *American Movie* who first comes off in a rather humorous light, but then quickly appears in circumstances that are not only humiliating, but ultimately, pathetic. What makes this documentary complicated as a question of ethics is the fact that Borchardt (1997) benefited from the success that his unflattering appearance brought to the film: Large audiences got to see his independent film, *Coven*, which was screened at the end of *American Movie*. Once *American Movie* was picked up by a major distributor, Borchardt even went out on a press junket to promote the latter film as its star, appearing on network talk shows as though he had “made it to Hollywood.” The visual mode of address was put fully into view in this documentary; Borchardt was well aware of this truth, and even though he looked like a fool, he nevertheless benefited financially from the success of the process.

- 26 I am not suggesting that the technique of doubling or redoubling is a matter simply of turning the camera on the filmmaker, thereby making his or her work into a kind of narcissistic autobiography. Most documentaries already exhibit autobiographical tendencies, if not by having the documentarian consistently appear in the film (as with the work of Michael Moore), then more commonly by leaving a distinctive authorial stamp on the work (as with the documentaries of Errol Morris). The subject of most documentaries, if not all of them, is *already* the filmmaker him or herself precisely because the medium of expression in documentary formally exhibits the structure of intentionality. Second, and more philosophically to the point, by proposing an ethic of truth, I am not suggesting that documentarians attempt to record the phenomenon of perception. This would be impossible because trying to do so would amount to capturing what Sartre (1957/1972) once described as the “transcendence of the ego,” to return to consciousness with a picture of what Husserl (1933/1993) calls the “transcendental background,” or to represent what Kant (1781/1965) calls the “I think” that accompanies all my representations. None of this would make any sense. Doubling and redoubling the vision of the documentary means, in short, to include the visual mode of address within the visible narrative, to allow to be seen that which mediates reality and the real.
- 27 Ruby’s introductory rationale for his *Picturing Culture* (2000), as well as his discussion therein of the unavailability of the most important examples of reflexive cinema, testifies to the kind of consistency that is required for the truth of a situation to be brought more fully to view.
- 28 These assumptions are particularly acute in the positivist process of producing “researchable footage” in ethnographic video and visual anthropology in general. As Ruby (2000) suggests, these social scientists will still believe that introducing the producer, process, or audience into the frame “would detract from the purpose of using a camera in the first place—that is, to record reality unobtrusively. To do so [they believe] would ‘disrupt’ the ‘natural’ flow of cultural events that are supposed to

- be recorded. It would introduce the apparently 'subjective' presence of the researcher into the 'objective' recording of the data" (p. 177). Ruby goes on to detail how, due to the simple necessity of editing footage, it remains impossible to produce any "pure" researchable footage, despite the desire of the anthropologist to do so.
- 29 "The relationship between participants and documentarists is far more pregnant with ethical difficulties than is the connection of filmmaker to audience. Unlike the audience, the vast majority of which remains usually unaffected (in measurable ways, at least) by any documentary it sees, participants are engaged in an exercise that could be life-changing" (Winston, 2000, p. 158).
- 30 The ethic of truth, as it relates to the problem of participant consent, corresponds generally to Ruby's (2000) definition of reflexivity.
- 31 According to Winston (2000), "[s]uch a quasi-duty of care is merited because it is still the case that documentary is fixated, albeit slightly less so these days in the UK, on the social victim. The taste for deviant proletarian youth is undiminished, however; and documentary is still intrusive, indeed more so with ultrasensitive miniaturized camcorders and cheap videotape. The balance of power remains significantly tilted towards the filmmaker, despite trace elements of a slowly rising social awareness among participants of what being involved in a documentary means" (p. 159).
- 32 Cf. Winston (1988).

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