

THE AUTOMATIC FICTION OF DOCUMENTARY
CLAIRE SIMON / OCTOBER 1995

Him: __What are you doing at the moment?

Me __I'm shooting a film....

Him: __Ah well? What is it?

Me __A film... (That's not enough... He wants details... He wants to form an opinion....)A film...(Come on! Too bad...) about a company. And that's it.

Then there's a silence, overwhelmed by my interlocutor who expects something else from cinema, then condescension which is generally expressed by the phrase: What else do you do? OK. I try to explain myself, to share my enthusiasm:

But you know, it's fascinating... The kitchen, the office.... With money writing the script, it's unstoppable... It's a real whodunit! The conflicts, the passions around work... It's like something out of Lubitsch... I mean, it's a bit like seeing the Marx Brothers setting up their company, or "the club of five against big business", you know what I mean, you know???? Yes, I admit that I'm panicking, I'm using every argument, I'm eating from every pot, to try to escape from what happened to me when I said 'company'. The damage that word has done in the conversation is definitive, I'll never get back on track. The man in front of me has filed my film away forever in the BORING' category in which he's used to putting documentaries, and now he thinks it's a corporate film to boot.... Which puts the boredom to come at least to the power of three.

This story is repeating itself, it's already happened to me with words other than 'company', with the word 'doctor' and the word 'recreation'.

Him: __"It's for TV, of course?"

I agree that the funding comes from...

Him: __ "52 minutes or 26?"

My interlocutor really knows his stuff...

Me: __ "I think it'll be an hour and a half, a normal film..." Him: __ "An hour and a half?"

Him: __ "An hour and a half about a company!!!"

Me: __ "Yes, it's nothing extraordinary, there have already been a lot of them and not the least: Modern Times, Citizen Kane, Forty Guns, The Crime of Mr Lange, Traffic, etc..."

Him: __ "ah! but those are fiction films!!! That's got nothing to do with it !!!"

So there you have it, the word FICTION has come out like a shout, like a banner, like when you say "American" or "professional". The word FICTION today designates something much admired in France, a certain standing of cinema that has precisely nothing to do with fiction (the fact of inventing a story and what story we invent) but rather with the reality of the Cinema business (everything you see in the image has been bought, paid for, everything is worth money, this money that ultimately measures, well, evaluates...). This infatuation with fiction, this sudden cult (the word Fiction as a magic formula is very recent) is a fetishist cult, we love the fake for the fake's sake... Why not? But it's a sign that we don't believe in what the fiction is about: the story being told, the actors playing it.

But that's not the case with documentaries: you believe it from the outset: it's true. In general, we accept the postulate of veracity in a documentary film, and so we can start to take an interest in what it's about, in the interest of the story, in the way it's told, since we no longer have to constantly ask ourselves whether it's plausible. However, few directors take advantage of the freedom that documentaries have, either because they are forbidden to do so by the channel or because they want the commission in order to have access to terrestrial broadcasting. Only Arte considers and encourages, and then only in certain 'slots', the singular approach of a documentary filmmaker.

As the organizer of the Festival du réel pointed out to me, the labels fiction and documentary are recent, dating back to the 1980s; before that, for example, we used to say militant cinema, not militant documentary, but experimental cinema, underground cinema and so on. The categories of fiction and documentary came straight out of the organisational chart of television companies, when little by little television stations submitted to the liberal economy and began to invest in cinema. Very soon most documentary films were produced by and for television, and the labels "fiction" and "documentary" were introduced to tidy up the accounts and differentiate between cinema and television. In short, it was necessary to name the money that went out and the money that came in... At the same time, we were gradually building up an image of a great character: TELEVISION. A great, tentacular figure who, like a medieval lord, presides over the existence of films, commissions them, finances them and broadcasts them. This figure who represents us, who is an incarnate interpretation of democracy, is a kind of fantasy that we place behind every television production without realizing it. As a result, there is a kind of automatic fiction that is secretly put in place as soon as we watch a film produced by television, particularly a documentary. In place of the director's or author's singular and assumed desire, a kind of ideological and commercial mission is imposed on TELE in general: "If they've sent a team there, it's because it's important". As a result, it's no longer a question of watching a film but rather of being 'in the know', of seeing, of recognising that 'it's on'. And the 'it's on' moment transforms the phrase 'it cost so much' into another: 'it's worth so much'.

What I'm saying is that once the founding gesture of a film is in the past, the very idea of interpreting the world tends to fade away in favour of the little story that each person invents in their head about why the film was made. There's a very persistent feeling that a documentary is by definition a commissioned film that THE TELECOMMUNITY has sent someone to make about it. This is untrue most of the time and actually prevents the film from giving its own reasons for being.

Throughout the making of a documentary film, the question of self-justification (it's an important subject, it has to be made, we're right to make it, etc.) assails the filmmaker's freedom of vision. Even when the film is finished, few people recognize that documentary filmmakers have the right to interpret the world by filming it (unlike any artist). Everyone imagines the documentary filmmaker only having to answer to the ideological mission of THE TELEVISION: has he succeeded in giving a good image, a fair image, a true image, etc.?

This question of truth is also a disguise for another question, an economic question: how are the actors in a documentary film paid for allowing themselves to be filmed? On the basis of what pact, which is apparently not a contract for money, can I, the viewer, see people in their own lives? An interesting and troubling question to which the Pavlovian answers of the market economy are not always enough. (Unless you consider money to be the perfect metaphor for desire).

A lot of documentaries are biased towards this question and run towards the simple journalistic hit parade: "we have to talk about this at the moment, it's important". So the imperative of topicality, fashion, ideology and militancy sidesteps the question of desire (on the part of the filmmaker, the protagonists and the viewers); desire undoubtedly implies loss, and that's why it's better to replace it with the journalistic imperative in a panic... Here's a little story about that: six years ago I decided to hire a V8 camera to shoot a film on my own with a doctor I knew well. In life, I was on first-name terms with this doctor, so in the film I continued to be on first-name terms with him. This simple use of the first name immediately changed the story that each viewer inevitably came up with about why the film was being made. You could ask yourself what kind of love, what kind of story the use of the familiar betrayed, and this story actually said that there were characters in the film caught up in their

own desire. Most of the time (LA TELE) substitutes a duty for this desire, and as a result the viewer is no longer drawn into a story where real, living, desiring characters are grappling with a subject, as in any fiction film (for example, in this film the characters were caught up in a drama: the sick/doctor relationship, and in "Coûte que coûte" in the drama: "economy"). TELEVISION prefers to find representatives of subjects (representatives of medicine or the economy, for example) and people are filmed for that reason: because they represent the important subject and not because they are grappling with that subject. The duty that we substitute for desire in television documentary writing prevents the film from any risk of gaping, of loss, of the unknown. I don't turn this desire into a fetish. All films are made with desire, that's for sure, from the worst to the best. In short, desire is not a recipe for success. Simply looking at it, envisioning it, directing it, burns. Substituting duty for desire, on the other hand, is a good old recipe that reassures everyone and fills the soup plates, and guarantees that even today we will see nothing more than the power of the television machine to bring its preconceptions into existence...

As for cinema, we have forgotten the famous phrase that still sometimes appears in the credits of fiction films: "any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental". In the past, a film that declared itself to be fiction could thus legally protect the inevitable veridical, documentary aspect of the story being told... Because cinema was understood, seen and made as a "legend" of life, everyday life, the life of everyone, the life of some, etc. Today we often have the impression that fiction cinema is not about how a film (after so many others) represents the world, History, but how it represents Cinema. Cinema idolises itself like a beautiful twilight lure, a fetish. We've forgotten what it can do: reveal. We love the word "fiction" for its social standing, for its academic challenge, rather like we love a mask that we no longer have to disguise and signify. It's as if all we (the audience) have left to love in film is the reality of cinema. This story of cinema that we call "love" often remains a simple story of cinema, i.e. of money.

In documentaries, fiction is missing (like money); it is what the filmmaker is striving for, because it is what is missing from the film all the time... Most of the time, a documentary is a frantic, passionate search for a story that we don't know and that threatens not to appear throughout the film. Every documentary film is situated in relation to this lack, and the story is the object of desire for both the filmmaker and the viewer. From that point on, each filmmaker and director deals with the missing fiction according to his or her desire. For a long time this was called creative documentary, and we used to say: "It's creative because it's prepared, staged...". Staged but always without fiction. For example, someone is having a meal. The meal is staged and lit. The fiction remains off-screen. The image we are filming looks at the fiction, so to speak, waits for it and sometimes makes it appear. It is the lack of fiction that provokes the desire to film: where it has been, where it is no longer, where it will return if we film... There are other ways of looking at this lack. For me, for example, what interests me is the unrepresented, the stories that we don't see because they are so obvious. The super present. That which exceeds the boredom of the present, that which survives it and which, as if nothing had happened: a story.

I knew a little boy of five who, one day, outwitted his baby sitter and ran home. He ran non-stop across a wide avenue to his front door. And when they found him, and he was willing to talk, he explained: I want to know what my mother does when I'm not there.

I'm a bit like him. When I see a man going off to work, I want to know exactly what his life is like there, what he does all day. He puts so much passion into his work, much more than into loving it sometimes, that you have to be able to tell the story, the stories. For me, it's not a question of knowing whether he's right or wrong to love work so much, but of telling the story of that passion.

October 95

I wrote these few lines before shooting "Sinon, oui" at the request of Raymond Bellour. Today, market value has supplanted all others. We live in a world of professionals where amateurs are rare and feel isolated and stupid. The value of a film is measured by its ratings and admissions. This value now applies to all of us, not just the merchants. This is what has changed, because market value seems more democratic to everyone. Thanks to the advanced liberal economy, what was most criticised in the communist countries will be achieved: the dictatorship of the monopoly. A single drink, a single airline, a single film that can be seen five or six times. The professionals work, but what about us? We play. It's not easy to play because, as everyone knows, we often lose at the game. It's this notion of loss that's so scandalous these days and that I find essential and difficult to maintain. What I like, for example, when I make a documentary film is that my work seems mainly derisory, but sometimes also marvellous to the people I'm filming, meaning that for them it occupies the same place as going to the cinema: it's pure loss. In other words, it's a matter of desire, of life, and there are no guarantees. It's about the essentials of life, the things you have to put aside all day or you'll never be a good professional again.