Rough Notes on the Truth Value of Images

In a recent lecture at Harvard University, Errol Morris was introduced by Homi Bhabha as "a non-fiction filmmaker". Morris opened his lecture with the following remarks:

I should point out that the use of the term "nonfiction feature"...was really a marketing tool. Probably the same could be said for Truman Capote's "non-fiction novel," as well — the desire to get your work before a larger audience, which is at least part of the motivation for making movies.... I picked this subject because ever since I started work as a filmmaker and probably long before, I was concerned, still am concerned, with issues of truth and self-deception. I've never liked the idea expressed by Godard that film is truth 24 times a second. I have a slightly different version. Film is lies 24 times a second. Almost the same, slightly different.

The first film I made, Gates of Heaven, was very much in reaction to a prevailing idea about how documentaries should be made. Namely, the idea of cinema verité, truth cinema. There was this idea that if you follow certain rules, if you shoot things in a certain way, then out pops the truth. The rules, themselves, are fairly straightforward. Shoot with a hand-held camera. Shoot with available light, become a fly-on-the-wall, observing but not observed in turn. And of course, try to be as unobtrusive as possible. It's one of those meat-grinder ideas. You put in the appropriate ingredients, and magically, truth results.

To me, it's utter nonsense. Who could have ever made such a claim? On the basis of what? Does the font you use to print a sentence guarantee its truth or falsity? I think not.... [S]tyle doesn't guarantee truth. How could it possibly ever do such a thing?  

This argument strikes me as somewhat misleading. The main point, that style is no guarantor of truth, seems accurate enough, maybe trivial, and probably uncontroversial. In fact, it's hard to imagine that anyone including the most ardent defenders of cinema verité would object to it. So to better appreciate what's at stake, we need to look more carefully at the purported "styles", aims, and techniques employed by documentary filmmakers.

An obvious response to Morris' claim might be that certain techniques, formats, and procedures used by the filmmaker are more likely than others to break through the opaque fabric of lies and reveal the truth. This is precisely the argument the defender of cinema verité might use to demonstrate why the recent film on the phenomenal career of Bob Dylan, No Direction Home, is less significant as a non-fiction film than D.A. Pennebaker's classic slice of the young Bob Dylan's life known as Don't Look Back.

The more recent Martin Scorcese film, released in 2005, has at its core the first-hand testimony of the subject, Bob Dylan, conveyed through interviews conducted by his manager (and co-producer of the film), Jeff Rosen. Rosen's role as interviewer is cut from the screen not simply to focus the viewer's attention exclusively on the artist, but because it's irrelevant — the only questions asked are those Dylan wants to answer. The result is an autobiographical account of Bob Zimmerman's early years supplemented with nearly three hours of clips from his childhood up to his emergence in the 1960s as the folk phenomenon and spokesman for a generation, i.e. "Bob Dylan". Careful editing contributes to a coherent and unified narrative of the artist as an innocent young musician and songwriter caught up, against his will, in a world of unrealistic expectations and fantasies forced on him by devoted fans and the media.

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1 Errol Morris, "The Anti-Post-Modern Post-Modernist", 2. See also http://www.errolmorris.com/content/lecture/theantipost.html (last access 15 April 2012)
And while it's a fact that "Dylan" was constructed as a prophet of the counter-cultural youth movement of the '60s (in which, I admit, I was an enthusiastic participant), this in itself does not tell "the whole story". *No Direction Home* is merely an "authorized version" of Dylan's early life, and nothing more.

Isn't D. A. Pennebaker's documentary from the mid-'60s, *Don't Look Back*, by contrast, the antithesis of the Dylan-authorized version? Not only does it focus on a very limited and precise moment — a three-week concert tour of England in March 1965 — but it unobtrusively, in orthodox *cinema vérité* fashion, records the artist as he writes, talks, drinks, hangs out with friends and acquaintances, and performs on stage, documenting without comment Dylan's day-to-day activities. Perhaps even more important for constructing this kind of "truth-effect" is the long take — the way the camera lingers for extended periods of time and in such an inconspicuous way on a particular scene or encounter, that it wears down all pretense and posing, goes beyond the possibility of the subject simply playing to the camera. It's at this stage that the viewer seems to become a proverbial fly-on-the-wall, gaining access to a range of behavior and a fuller sense of the real complexity of the character and the situation in which he finds himself.

I have examples that may illustrate my point. The first one comes from Pennebaker's film. Dylan is on tour in England accompanied by friends Bob Newirth, Alan Price of the Animals, his manager Albert Grossman, and others. In this segment, Dylan is in the dressing room in Newcastle waiting to go onstage. The soundcheck has been done and there's nothing left to do but wait nervously for the call. This scene opens with a shot of a young, earnest and painfully sincere science student who writes music criticism for a local newspaper. What we witness is the way nervous energy gets channeled by Dylan into a merciless put-on or sending-up of the defenseless interviewer. Dylan controls the discourse by turning around the impossible questions he's typically asked by reporters and directing them to the science student (who, by the way, went on to become the president of Chrysalis records.)

Near the end of the scene when the science student is finally allowed to ask his first question and falters, there's a knock at the door. Bob Newirth answers and tells Dylan that the High Sheriff's Lady is here and would like to meet him. Dylan's demeanor changes dramatically from the cynical smart-ass celebrity poet/performer that he's playing for the student to the slightly perplexed and hesitant young man being summoned by the voice of an unknown authority of some sort. There's a cut to the scene in which he's introduced to the visitor and her three sons (two of which have the same name!) One can't help but notice how control of the discourse shifts from Dylan to the High Sheriff's Lady with Dylan adopting the position of the shy, polite young subject obediently listening to his guest and graciously shaking hands with her sons.

The second example comes from roughly the same period of Dylan's life as portrayed in Scorsese's *No Direction Home*. This is after the tour of England at the time of the infamous appearance of Dylan's electric band at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. The montage is very different from Pennebaker's. Here we see Dylan talking about his intentions and interests *vis a vis* those of his critics. The scene also includes, as is typical of the entire film, excerpts from interviews with other musicians, producers, technicians, and friends, still-photos and clips from the recording sessions, interviews, and performances.

The differences between DLB and NDH couldn't be more dramatic. Where Pennebaker's style is rough, direct, the camera present but unobtrusive, the subject's behavior documented in apparently unmediated fashion, Scorsese is smooth, highly refined, and scrupulously selective for the liberal public television audience (no reference to drugs, alcohol, sex, etc. — all significant components of Dylan's life and work.) But, of course, we know that some of these disparities are misleading. Both films are constructions. Both are selective and well-crafted. But is there not reason to believe that the *cinema vérité*
style used by Pennebaker in filming his subject makes it more likely that the camera will catch those moments when the reality of the past is made present?

What the filmmaker does with the footage is another matter, of course. And this is where the “shift” to Errol Morris’ construction of a film may be instructive. What Morris does with the tools of the cinema vérité filmmaker, according to Linda Williams, is to combine them with “fictional” or “near documentary” reenactments based on testimony given during extensive interviews in order to track down the traces of history (“truth”) in the present.

Truth is “not guaranteed” [in this process] and cannot be transparently reflected by a mirror with a memory, yet some kinds of partial and contingent truths are nevertheless the always receding goal of the documentary tradition. Instead of careening between idealistic faith in documentary truth and cynical recourse to fiction, we do better to define documentary not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths.

Now the highly refined approach taken by Scorsese in No Direction Home might bear some superficial resemblance to the so-called “postmodern” style of Errol Morris’ The Thin Blue Line. In both cases the interviewer is not represented on camera and remains invisible to the viewer who is presented with a carefully crafted story re-assembled from hours of testimony and thousands of images. But there are important differences as well.

Contrary to what he suggests, Morris’ The Thin Blue Line has at its core a technique taken directly from cinema vérité but strategically manipulated by Morris in the editing process. I’m speaking here of the way the camera stays with the subject long enough for the inherent complexity and contradictions of the subject to emerge. The orthodox style of Pennebaker makes these elements visible by means of the long take so that the viewer witnesses them on the screen. Morris gets the same result by keeping the subject engaged in conversation during the filming of the interviews. You don’t witness Morris the interviewer until the very end of TTBL. But he’s there throughout the filming, talking with his subjects and, more importantly, keeping them talking. And that’s the key. His experience is that if they talk long enough, the “unexpected” begins to emerge and the truth is finally revealed through the informal discourse of conversation. And isn’t that precisely the rationale behind the unblinking gaze of the cinema vérité camera which Morris so adamantly disparages and disavows?

Now we see what Morris is getting at when he claims that working in the cinema vérité style is equivalent to a graphic designer adopting a particular look and feel by choosing, for example, the Times New Roman font over Helvetica. There’s an insight there, but it’s not at all made clear by the analogy. Notice that he’s comparing a general approach to filmmaking, one that includes a wide range of techniques, on the one hand, with the very precise choice of a graphic element — the font — on the other. His aim is to show that cinema vérité style is not sufficient for capturing the truth — it no more guarantees truth in film than does graphic design in print. But this rather weak analogy disregards a valuable contribution of cinema vérité filmmaking by concealing an important and contradictory detail not at the level of style, namely the sustained openness to the subject. This is the strategy Morris takes from the cinema vérité toolbox and uses to the same end — the disclosure of truth. Granted, Morris presents the results of the unblinking eye (and ear) of the camera in a different way, with lots of cuts interspersed with re-enactments, clips from Hollywood movies, other talking heads, etc. etc. But the effect and goal is the same — maybe not "truth 24 times per second”, but truth nonetheless. And that’s the key to Morris’ insight as an investigative filmmaker.

Morris' disavowal of cinema verité is not unique. A number of filmmakers have, in recent years, taken adversarial positions. So, for example, Werner Herzog, in search of what he calls "ecstatic truth", claims "the so-called Cinema Verité is devoid of verité. It reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants." The distinction, according to Herzog, is that of truth versus (mere) facts. For example, he says "Cinema Verité confounds fact and truth…. Fact creates norms, and truth illumination…. Filmmakers of Cinema Verité resemble tourists who take pictures amid ancient ruins of facts." In contrast, he claims "[t]here are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization." 

This suggests more than a casual link between Herzog and Morris, who often introduces "fictions", fabrications, and dissembling in his investigations. All the parties involved in the murder of a police officer in TTBL are put on the stand; divergent testimonies are presented and illustrated; questions raised; the evidence laid out for the viewer. Their styles are different. In Herzog's case, for example in Wheel of Time and Grizzly Man, the filmmaker guides the narrative by means of voice-over. This provides both a personal perspective and running interpretation of the events depicted on the screen.

Once asked about the work of Errol Morris, Herzog elaborated on the nature of "ecstatic truth" and its role in fiction as well as non-fiction film.

"[Y]ou must seek out and search for deeper strata of truth that are possible, for example, in great poetry. When reading a great poem by Robert Frost, you sense there's a deep, deep truth inherent in it, and you can never name it. It's the same thing as what I call the "Ecstatic Truth." An Ecstatic Truth is possible in documentaries and of course in my feature films — I've always striven for that. It is something deeply inherent, where you recognize yourself as a human being again, where you find images that have been dormant inside of you for so many years and all of a sudden it becomes visible and understandable for you — you read the world differently, your perceptions change. And Errol is one of those who is going for the Ecstatic Truth, and stylizes and invents." 

But doesn't this approach suggest a divergence in their conceptions of truth? Are they talking about the same thing? Where Morris plays the role of detective or investigative reporter, digging up the facts and putting his witnesses on the stand, Herzog is searching for the runic — a mysterious opening up of "being". Morris' insistence on reality, the causal network of events, the fact that things happen in particular ways, seems to ground his approach in empirical analysis and scientific investigation. Herzog's quest for "poetic, ecstatic truth" suggests a link to Heidegger's "unconcealing of being" and, perhaps, a different way of knowing in which the sharp distinction between everyday fact and fiction is not so obvious. Herzog's goal is truth in the sense of the real ("true") nature of things. One's relation to such "truth" is not precluded by interpretation and imaginative engagement, which, as in literature, often play an instrumental role in giving access to the other "strata" — the "deeply inherent" side of human experience.

It's very blurred [the distinction between fact and fiction] and things in my [non-fiction] films are partially staged. It's not just a position of observing and recording. One of the very beautiful scenes in Wheel of Time, the lonesome bodyguard at the end who seems to be forgotten and not called off his duty and protecting no one from not much of a crowd. That is staged. The distinction between what I see and record just as an observer and what I stage and the way I narrate the film and use music and the

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3 See his "Minnesota Declaration" and "On the Absolute, the Sublime, and the Ecstatic Truth" at http://www.wernerherzog.com/117.html (last access 15 April 2012).
4 Ibid., "Minnesota Declaration".
way I create a certain climate is all different from what you would normally expect from a documentary…. I’ve always made it very clear that for the sake of a deeper truth, a stratum of very deep truth in movies you have to be inventive, you have to be imaginative. Otherwise you will end up with what cinema verité does — they are the accountants of truth. I’m after something deeper.\(^6\)

In the [final scene from] *Wheel of Time* you get a sense for Herzog's approach to non-fiction filmmaking and his poetic search for the unspeakable. He claims he's after that which eludes the gaze of the "accountants of truth". He uses a number of strategies to get at the "hidden strata", not all of which are accounted for by the staging or re-enactment of a scene — a technique he may have picked up from Morris. Rather, there is another, more common tool he shares with other poetic filmmakers such as Robert Bresson and Andrei Tarkovsky, as well as with the dreaded "accountants" of cinéma vérité. Here I refer once again to the technique of the lingering gaze upon the subject — the slow takes that resist rapid cuts from one image to the next and invite the viewer to contemplate and reflect on what one sees — used by Herzog to disclose the "truth" that would otherwise be lost.

It may seem that I’m exaggerating this point about the long take when applied to Errol Morris, so let me make it clear that I'm not claiming he uses long visual takes, although these do occur from time to time in his films. Rather, my point is that he applies the same logic to his interviews, knowing as he does that through patiently sustained and informal "interrogation", truths are likely to emerge.

So the distance between Herzog and Morris, in the end, is due less to their visual styles than to their seemingly divergent understandings of truth. This divergence is most apparent at the level of desire — what each one hopes to find. The mysterious object of Herzog's desire — the forever historical and hidden nature of things that resist representation — is guided by one aspect of truth which he call "ecstatic". Morris' relentless pursuit of the concrete fact of the matter about what happened, to whom, and when in the concrete world of material relations, is guided by an "empirical" notion of truth that can, ultimately, be represented (and mis-represented) through narratives constructed out of hypotheses, evidence, and facts. And with it he goes one step further, to show how those narratives are constructed and what they do with "the truth".

My view is that the truth is knowable, but often that we have a vested interest in not knowing, not seeing it, disregarding it, avoiding it. Consequently, my interest in truth had two parts — an interest in the pursuit of truth and an interest in examining how people manage to avoid the truth in one way or another.

I haven't mentioned it up to this point, but I should tell you, I don't think pictures have any truth-value. I'm always mystified when people talk about the truth and falsity of pictures. Correct me if I'm wrong here, but truth is something that arises out of the relationship between language and the world. If I look at a picture alone, it tells me nothing.\(^7\)

Nothing without a narrative, that is.


\(^{\text{7}}\) Errol Morris, op. cit., 3.