

# The Documentary Form and Lacan's Four Discourses

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**Abstract:** This paper is an exploratory sketch that considers how we might employ Jacques Lacan's four discourses, as developed in his seminar XVII, to analyze how the genre of non-fiction film deals with its own internal limit (the film form) to document reality or adequately disseminate knowledge. By first reading a series of documentary films alongside the master's, university, and hysteric's discourses (all of which reify some social link), we then consider if the analyst's discourse can be utilized by the documentarian to produce a knowledge of the unconscious; a knowledge that can expose and potentially dissolve the social link.

**Keywords:** object *a*, surplus-*jouissance*, master signifier, Other/knowledge, discourse, documentary form, seminar XVII.

"No doubt it's around this word 'knowledge' that there is a point of ambiguity . . ." (14)<sup>1</sup>

"Sneaking around is not transgressing. Seeing a door half-open is not the same as going through it." (19)<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

In the 2009 documentary film *A Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, Slavoj Žižek likens watching a film to a pervert. We the viewer look through the peep hole waiting for and anticipating the real to appear on the screen, exemplified in the famous toilet scene in *The Conversation* (1974) where what we expect to happen, the remnants of a murder emerging through the one contraption that is supposed to remove the evidence once and for all, suddenly appears, to our horror and delight. Cinema allows us to enjoy what we normally do not get to experience in our day-to-day reality. The structure is perverse because while we gaze at the illicit or transgressive, we remain in the safe confines of the movie theater. If narrative film flirts with a real that teases and baits the limits of reality, then documentary film is struck by a similar fate. But in this latter form, could we say that the difference, if any, is didactic; that is, a didactic exploration of various cinematic techniques of manipulation in order to present a reality from which we might just get closer to a knowledge of the real (of some event, question, problem, political or aesthetic persuasion, etc.)? Even the word didactic might be too strong. What I am suggesting is that the documentary form is always already haunted by approximation, and therefore, whether consciously or unconsciously, resorts to manipulation to either conceal or foreground its own conceit. Of course, getting closer

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1 Lacan, 2007, p. 14.

2 Lacan 1977, p. 19.

to the Lacanian real is precisely just that; it is not some-Thing that can be accessed or seen or put into words. The point I am making is that, conscious or not of the object's impossibility of coming into the light, the documentary form is just as troubled with reality as narrative film. Each is fated to mess with form in order to influence how content delivers its (un)intended message. And so it is through the medium of artifice, or by way of the obstacle or gap between so-called reality and some presumptive real, that allows us to interrogate how form tends to lead content down this troubled path to some obscure object.

From here, we could say that documentary film has its own history of experimentation before the altar of the real. Lacan writes, “[*episteme*] is all about finding the position that makes it possible for knowledge to become the master's knowledge”.<sup>3</sup> A discourse (or *episteme*) is founded on the differential logic of signifiers (“a heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic or nonlinguistic, under the same heading”)<sup>4</sup>, how they fit together to create an apparatus (*dispositif*), which then recognizes patterns of intelligibility, transmits knowledge, and produces power relations and shapes behaviors. Key to the position of a discourse is its disavowal or repression of some internal limit. What a discourse strategically *seeks* to internalize is a metalanguage that then enables the discourse to function smoothly, without stutter, doubt, or bad conscience. Here metalanguage is synonymous with Lacan's ‘master's knowledge’; it is a language that elevates mere discourse to the status of knowledge. We could say that the study of film genre is first and foremost a question of establishing a discursive apparatus that recognizes patterns, predictability, and transmission. What often happens in genre studies is a discussion of how a film or a filmmaker tests the boundaries of genre; how elements or signifiers are added to the film that undermine or stretch the authority of the genre. Bill Nichols, in his *Introduction to Documentary Film*, attempts to create a discursive apparatus through which we could identify the various modes existing within the genre. He develops a taxonomy of modes and identifies six of them; Poetic, Expository, Observational, Participatory, Reflexive, and Performative.<sup>5</sup> The problem with Nichol's work is not its descriptive quality of categorization or even its degree of categorical correctness; it is rather what it has to leave out in order for the book to hold together, to make sense. My interest is to consider what does not make sense in any given documentary film, or what forms at the limits of sense. How does a documentary film acknowledge or account for nonsense, or fail to do so? How might such nonsense lend insight to Lacan's work on *jouissance*—a useless or excess expenditure produced at the limit of sense?

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<sup>3</sup> Lacan 2007, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Agamben 2009, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Nichols 2010, p. 31.

This is why we need to turn to Lacan and his four discourses. Not to present a rival taxonomy, but to add to how we might read the documentary film. Consider this exercise as borrowing from the Deleuzian metaphor that philosophy is a toolbox. Here we use Lacan's four discourses as a tool to bugged the documentary form with precisely those terms that a discourse fails to contain (surplus *jouissance*) represses (master signifier), or disavows (the split subject). Lacan's contribution in his XVII<sup>th</sup> seminar is, among other things, to examine how lack and enjoyment function within four particular discourses. Lacan writes, “[discourse] subsists in certain fundamental relations which would literally not be able to be maintained without language. Through the instrument of language, a number of stable relations are established, *inside which something that is much larger and goes much further than actual utterances can, of course, be inscribed.*”<sup>6</sup>

Lacan's project is to determine how the discourse of the master gives way to the university and hysteric's discourses, which then gives birth to the analyst's discourse. More specifically, how does a discourse account for the following: 1) A signifier (S1) which represents a subject for another signifier, and whose point of signification is arbitrary and nonsensical; 2) The production of knowledge (S2), or the know-how needed to make knowledge something that sticks to a master and have value; 3) The split subject (\$) who represents a negativity that threatens the integrity or value of any given discourse; and 4) a surplus-*jouissance* or enjoyment (*a*) that is produced by the incommensurable relation between a signifier (S1) and knowledge (S2). How these four terms influence each of the four discourses depends on how they are positioned within a dynamic structure that includes an agent that addresses a certain knowledge or Other, which then produces some product or surplus, and manages to conceal or repress some position of truth (or guiding presupposition) from which it comes. This dynamic will become clearer below. Suffice it to say here that my claim is that all documentary film contains these elements. For example, you have the filmmaker who considers her position of authority (editing, sound, lighting, shot selection, participation, etc.); the actual edited content of the film (the stitching of elements or signifiers into a whole); the unconscious optics of the camera, which, to some degree, of course, escapes the authority of the filmmaker, and which becomes the domain of the reader, what Roland Barthes termed the pleasure of the text; and a hidden presupposition that sets into motion the intended outcome of the film but which never arrives at its destination. All of this constitutes what is “much larger and goes much further” than how the film is inscribed within the discourse of filmic form as well as the particular film's content.

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<sup>6</sup> Lacan 2007, p. 13. Italics my emphasis.

What follows is a preliminary sketch. It is not meant to create a discursive apparatus on its own and from which we could then slot and interpret film (even though it clearly entertains this thought). Rather, it is meant to see how Lacan can bugger the documentary form so as to impregnate new or different takes. Further, it is to attempt to put forward a theory and method of documentary filmmaking that takes seriously the discourse of the analyst. If the discourse of the analyst is the only revolutionary discourse, the one that exposes and dissolves the master signifier, how might documentary filmmaking apply this discourse to their art? I will proceed by way of example(s), beginning with the master's, followed by the university, hysteric's and, finally, the analyst's discourses.<sup>7</sup>

**The Master's Discourse:**

S1 → S2

\$ a

Agent → Other  
Truth Product

Watching Werner Herzog's remarkable and critically acclaimed documentary film *Grizzly Man* about Timothy Treadwell, a self-made expert on grizzly bears who, for thirteen summers, would camp in a remote area of Alaska in order to research and protect the bears from poachers, and in 2003 was, with his girlfriend Amie Huguenard, mauled to death by a grizzly bear, one cannot but be taken aback by Herzog's hovering voice over. Herzog does not simply point out critical pieces of information to help the audience gain their bearings; rather he intervenes at the level of philosopher, psychologist, and film critic. The objectivity of Herzog's reading of Treadwell begins to feel off when we sense that a rivalry is afoot. This tension is crystallized in a remarkable sequence in which Treadwell becomes emotionally upset when a baby fox has been killed and a baby cub has been eaten by a male bear so as to prepare the female bear, as she continues to lactate for the cub, for mating. Herzog voice-over says: "(Treadwell) holds the sentimentalized view that everything out there (in nature) was good and the universe in balance and harmony. I believe the common denominator of the universe is not harmony but chaos, hostility, and murder." Here we begin to see the outlines for a master/slave like drama: Treadwell's naïve romanticism and amateur filmmaking (the heroic but ill-fated 'slave' who sets out to live off the

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7 What follows is the development of a brief section of a paper I recently wrote on the film *The Act of Killing*. See Denny 2017

grid, free of the demands and discontents of civilization) and Herzog's dark enlightenment philosophy and expert filmmaking (the 'master' whose very intelligence is premised on the heroism of the slave to reach for the impossible but to fail).

Strange is not so much Herzog's analysis of Treadwell, but the insistence of Herzog's desire to locate meaning in Treadwell's labor, to form some social link so that Treadwell's questionable motives may be redeemed into a sacrifice from which something might be gained. Lacan writes, "Philosophy in its historical function is this extraction, I would almost say this betrayal, of the slave's knowledge, in order to obtain its transmutation into the master's knowledge."<sup>8</sup> We know from Lacan's discourse of the master that the master's authority comes from something external to him, that he is nothing without the other's recognition, and that the fight to death at the heart of the master's survival is the maintenance of those symbolic terms that form the coordinates of the relation. It is not so much that Herzog needs Treadwell's recognition (of course, he never met Treadwell, and only knows him through 100 or so hours of Treadwell's own footage and interviews with family and friends), as he does Treadwell's insights, his labor of love, his madness. As such, Treadwell becomes a kind of cipher or ghost from which Herzog can stage and then answer a philosophical problem; namely, what is the relation between nature and civilization and is there an invisible boundary or gap that holds them apart; one that cannot be crossed without lethal consequences? Here Treadwell becomes S2, a conflicting battery of signifiers, what Lacan calls "[T]he stomach of the Other, the big Other, . . . (which) is like some monstrous Trojan horse that provides the foundations for the fantasy of a total knowledge."<sup>9</sup> This 'monstrous Trojan horse' is precisely the Other that threatens the master, or, in Herzog's case, fascinates him, presenting a puzzle of sorts that requires domestication.

But this begs the question: what represents the S1, the master-signifier, that sits on the top left-hand corner, and which represents the sign of authority that sets into motion knowledge, providing cover (symbolic status) for the split subject (\$) ? I argue that the master signifier, S1, that frames the films unfolding and direction is not Treadwell, but nature. Treadwell becomes a Trojan horse that stands in for the more probing question—not only what is nature, but how does nature lend insight into human nature? We clearly see this in the film's conclusion, where, over a *misc-en-scene* of foxes and grizzlies playing in the grassy field, and Treadwell aimlessly walking amongst his animal friends, Herzog says:

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8 Lacan 2007, p. 22.

9 Lacan 2007, p. 33.

What remains is his footage. And while we watch the animals in their joys of being, in their grace and ferociousness, a thought becomes more and more clear. That it is not so much a look at wild nature as it is an insight into ourselves, our nature. And that, for me, beyond his mission, gives meaning to his life and death.

Given the grammar of the film, the use of editing and shot selection to parse together a 1 hour and 44-minute film, one cannot but be struck by this conclusion. Due to constraints of time, I will not develop this point by analyzing scenes from the film, but suffice it to say here that Herzog focuses less on Treadwell's becoming-animal in the affirmative and impossible vein of helping the bears or subverting the requirements of civilization or commenting on the limit and folly of anthropology.<sup>10</sup> Rather, he focuses almost exclusively on Treadwell's inner journey, propping up nature as a mirror to expose his inner demons. For example, we get Treadwell talking about his problems with women and how cool it would be to be gay in order to get quicker results; we get Treadwell talking in a performative diva-like voice, as he insists on the authenticity of his love for these animals; and we get this long take towards the end of the film of Treadwell berating the park service for trying to run him off the land and not fully appreciating his cause. In fact, Herzog feels compelled to provide a voice-over here: "His rage is almost incandescent. The actor in his film has taken over from the filmmaker. I have seen this madness before on a film-set. But Treadwell is not an actor in opposition to a director or a producer—he's fighting civilization itself." Herzog then feels compelled to say how this is a line he will not cross with Treadwell. Juxtaposed to this footage of Treadwell, Herzog also enlists others to support his thesis that Treadwell has crossed an imaginary boundary. There is a native working in a local museum who speaks about ancient customs in which the grizzly world is revered as separate; a wildlife ecologist who gives scientific testimony to the real nature of the grizzly; and there is a pilot who says that Treadwell got what was coming to him. We also learn from his Long Island suburban parents that he left home, changed his name, attempted to become an actor in Los Angeles, suffered from alcoholism, and loved his teddy bear, which he had with him in his summer trips into the wild.

Given this body of evidence, Herzog's position is pretty straightforward: Treadwell is a naïve romantic who seeks to escape the confines of civilization, and who thus sublimates some deeper angst or disappointment with a dangerous love affair with the bears. While it is true that Treadwell may indeed be haunted by some obscure event or object from his past life, and, through sublimation raises this abject remainder of whatever event or object to the dignity of the Thing, the

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent reading of this film see Pettman 2009.

*stranger thing*, nonetheless, is Herzog's insistence to determine these terms over and against other signifiers that could complicate his own mastery of the situation, or, for that matter, allow the terms and the events to unfold on their own. Further, his insistence is tinged with his own satisfaction in poetizing for the audience the lesson that can be gleaned from Treadwell. This is what allows him to stitch a stomach full of signifiers into a final establishing shot (cited just above) which then creates the social link. Despite Treadwell's demons, narcissism, and misguided rage, he nonetheless gives meaning to our own inner struggle with nature. And so it is: nature functions as the master signifier—the nonsensical and irrational kernel that unites Treadwell (naïve romantic) with Herzog (dark enlightenment)—which then sutures the incommensurability (rivalry) between the master and slave, or between Herzog (the split subject) and Treadwell (the Other). Treadwell's actual work, his knowhow, a point that cannot be taken lightly when you consider how much time he spent in the wild with the grizzlies, is used to promote Herzog's *own* vision of nature. As such, what is produced, the object *a*, at the bottom right corner of the master's discourse, is a surplus *jouissance* or enjoyment, which is enjoyed at the expense of Treadwell. More specifically, it is an enjoyment that is procured for the master, in this case not only Herzog but also the viewer.

Before moving on, I need to mention one crucial scene, perhaps *the* crucial scene. In the middle of the film, we see Herzog's listening to an audio of Treadwell and Amie Huguenard screaming bloody murder as they are gorged to death by a grizzly bear. We view this from a side angle that allows us to look at the face of Jewel Palovak, a close friend of Treadwell who held all the rights to the video files and who gave Herzog the permission to make the film. It is this scene where Herzog truly assumes the position of the master. Herzog listens for only a minute or two of the six minutes and then says that he has heard enough. He earnestly tells Jewel, whose face is riveted with horror as she watches Herzog listen to the tape, that she should never listen to it, that it will always represent a white elephant, a siren song, and that she should either burn it or lock it up in a safety deposit box. One cannot help but think that the reality being withheld is the master signifier itself, the horror of nature itself, testimony of its deeper chaos and murder, one that we can only approximate in reality, or, better, in film. In narrative film we can get Lars von Trier's fox in *Antichrist* that utters "chaos reigns" or Marlon Brando at the end of *Apocalypse Now* when he whispers "the horror, the horror." The real of nature is staged/acted. In a seeming stroke of luck (that Treadwell had his camera on, though with lens cap on, when he was attacked), Herzog has access to the (non-fictional) thing itself, unfettered by acting or a stage. Curious in Herzog's gesture is not so much that we feel or experience our lack of being, our alienation within language that is conferred upon us by our acceptance of the master; rather, in this instance, we modern subjects are instructed to accept it. It is a strange cinematic moment.

Because Herzog assumes this paternal position of 'knowing better', he also finds himself in a position to enjoy what is produced from this situation; namely, a surplus-*jouissance* generated from our forced submission. This is not to say that he should have let us hear the screams or that the film would be better for it; rather, it reveals his own relation to truth (\$, in the lower-left hand corner). In other words, why did Herzog film the scene the way he did? Because it provides the evidence for the efficacy of his master signifier. Nature as real is something that *can* be directly accessed. It can be shown, displayed before our eyes or ears, and, as such, it is horrific, not something the general public should have to endure. Herzog is far from castrated. The potency of a master signifier is to precisely secure the standing of the master or subject over and against the Other. However, from a Lacanian perspective, we can argue that Herzog is in fact furthest from the real, that his safeguarding it is a gesture that betrays the safekeeping of his own master signifier. Nature functions as a lure, and Treadwell as the bait.

**University Discourse:**

S2 → a  
 S1    \$

Agent → Other  
 Truth    Product

The example of a documentary film that assumes the position of the University is the very popular 2006 film on Global Warming called *The Inconvenient Truth* directed by Davis Guggenheim. The film is mostly comprised of Guggenheim following Al Gore on a speaking tour. The film functions as a fascinating sort of liberal manifesto. It summons the courage to address the real problem and enemy that faces humanity, using sophisticated visual effects to simulate the horror that awaits our future if we fail to do anything about it. At the level of science, it is hard to complain about this film. It is indeed expertly researched and presented. The problem is that Gore, who clearly assumes the position of the agent of expert knowledge, is repressing or, perhaps better, burying the truth (the master signifier) that confers his own position within a chain of other signifiers. This becomes clearer towards the end of the film when he explains the psychological reasons why we allow this warming to continue. We liberal citizens of the world are like the frog who sits in a pot of water that is ever slowly rising in temperature. We, the frog, do not realize this gradual increase until, that is, we either die from the temperature or are rescued. The striking conclusion to this film is the message that we need to change the way we think, and, even better, that this is not a political issue but a moral one. Therefore, and more

succinctly, what is being repressed or disavowed from Gore's position of agency is his master, namely globalized capitalism.

While it seems as though he is addressing us, his fellow liberal citizens, he is actually addressing an excess or a surplus-*jouissance* that he cannot contain, nor wishes to properly address (upper right-hand corner). Thus, from a Lacanian perspective, Gore's beautiful soul is exposed; his attempt at addressing the Other with an expert knowledge that will help change how we think in order to save the world turns out to be a liberal fantasy. What we really need to think about is how to traverse the fantasy of the liberal democratic institution for which Gore serves.

While it is true that Gore mentions economics and the lack of political will, he does so in rather soft and even vague terms. For example, he never even utters the word capitalism, let alone how this economic force completely revolutionized the modern world, throwing a seemingly harmless human dependency on nature into a mortal fight for survival. He even says that through new technologies we can maintain economic growth, which betrays the fact that he does acknowledge that capital is premised on growth. So, we can have our cake and eat it too; the incessant but productive revolutionizing force of capital at the cost of a slight shift in habit formation, that is, moral psychology. We have become habituated creatures of consumption who understandably operate through the guise of a rationalist choice theory. He uses the historical examples of cigarette smoking and the civil rights movement to suggest that humans are capable of moral change; that a stronger argument will eventually win out over a weaker one. As for the rhetorical spirit of moral psychology, he solicits a sentimental connection with his audience by recounting the story of his 6-year old son who was near fatally struck by an automobile. We are led to think that it is this sudden existential encounter with the mortality of his son that sent him on his Sisyphus-like journey to educate the world of the one moral problem that unites us all. To argue that climate change is a moral and not a political issue is to reproduce the ideology of capitalism itself: change happens on an individual level, who then incites the political will for real change. To not foreground climate change as a political problem, first and foremost, enables a critique of political-economy to remain repressed or disavowed. This position is solidified in the closing credits where we, the liberal viewer, are provided with the actual terms of the manifesto. We are told to recycle, buy a hybrid car if we can, write to congress, talk to others, conserve electricity, etc. The result or product of this discourse (\$, situated in the lower right-hand corner) is the reproduction of the liberal subject—at once outraged and incredulous over the Koch brother, Republicans, fossil fuel lobbyist, Fox News, family members, while also faithful to recycling, buying locally, feeling bad about not riding a bike to work; in a word, political cynicism. Here enjoyment, or surplus-*jouissance*, is mobilized in the production of subjectivity. Thus, we wring our hands and mock our own faithfulness to the altar of sustainability,

despite having the knowledge that sustainability is a cruel joke; that real economic sustainability entails a political revolution of the economic system. The rub is how surplus enjoyment is given value, a kind of imitative *jouissance*; how enjoyment becomes squeezed and exploited as a source of value. When Gore laments that he has failed in his educative mission, it seems clear that he has succeeded in giving value to his own personal sense of failure. As he says, “you make the most of the situation.” It seems that the following words from Lacan could be applied directly to Gore: “Capitalist exploitation effectively frustrates him of his knowledge by rendering it useless. What, in a type of subversion, gets returned to him is something different—master’s knowledge. And this is why all that he has done is change masters. What remains, in effect, is the essence of the master, namely, that he does not know what he wants.”<sup>11</sup>

The university discourse presents a challenge to filmmakers who want to make a difference through the dissemination of well-argued and presented information. As we will see below, the hysteric’s discourse may be too indulgent, insistent, or performative, the analyst’s discourse too difficult to stage and pull off, and the master’s discourse too heavy-handed, and thus not convincing. I mention this to reiterate that Lacan’s discourses are not totalizing formations; that there is a certain degree of play between them depending on where one stands in relation to the other coordinates. Whether consciously or unconsciously, filmmakers have to ask themselves how to document and present information of an event that somehow moves beyond (mediated) reality to the (impossible) real. I can think of a recent film that struggles with this problem: *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016). This film explores the socio-political and economic reality of the mass incarceration of African-Americans, a trend that began under the Reagan Administration, exploded under Bill Clinton, and which persists to the present moment. The film uses tropes common to expository documentary filmmaking such as historical footage and clips to provide context, interviews with a range of experts and activists in the field, and clips or interviews with the opposing side. On the surface, it looks like it belongs in the University; it expertly disseminates historical information. However, what differentiates this film from *An Inconvenient Truth* is the way it addresses the non-sensical *jouissance* of racism (the object *a* in the upper right-hand corner) versus the way Gore addresses the enjoyment of denying climate change. The principal cause or quilting point (the S1 in the bottom left corner) that holds the tapestry of a thread that spans from slavery to mass incarceration is twofold; political economy and theft of enjoyment. It is important to emphasize principal causes because they are not the only factors, but it is the one thread that runs through it all, especially with regard to political-economy: early prison labor, Jim Crow laws, redlining, and mass incarceration. So, the agent of knowledge (S2),

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11 Lacan 2007, p. 32.

Ava DuVernay, the filmmaker, does not directly name the master, but simply exposes a chain of signifiers, all connected, that leads back to this one enigmatic signifier that implies both terms: capital and enjoyment. Indeed, slavery was principally an economic motive, which seemingly runs right up to and through mass incarceration, but it is also the anxiety that the Black man will steal the White man’s enjoyment—his jobs, his women, his manhood, his property, etc. My point here with regard to the university discourse is that while DuVernay assumes the position of knowledge, she manages to hystericize this knowledge by troubling the relay between S2 and *a*. This is best illustrated toward the end of the film. Here, a Black commentator remarks on how Whites express astonishment over past instances of hate and intolerance—attending a lynching, separate water fountains—and how they would never have tolerated that. He retorts, “the truth is, we are living at this time, and we are tolerating it.” If the film produces value for the subject, it is a value that affirms the subject’s own negativity; that is, if there is enjoyment leaked to the viewing subject it is one that ends up challenging one’s own libidinal investment in the issue. Here the typical liberal disposition that morally grandstands about the value multiculturalism and tolerance is inverted, therein becoming the very symptom that sustains racism. Again, I cite this example because I feel the documentary form struggles with the University discourse due to the way it tends to be self-aware of its own authority. Where Gore uses his authority to display his beautiful soul, DuVernay uses her authority to cross discourses (between the University and the hysteric) by hystericizing the chain of signifiers that justify law and order<sup>12</sup>.

**Hysteric’s Discourse:**

$\$ \rightarrow S1$   
 $a \quad S2$

$\frac{\text{Agent}}{\text{Truth}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{Other}}{\text{Product}}$

The documentary form that has experimented with and explored different techniques in order to get at something more real than reality is the hysteric’s discourse. I agree with William Rothman’s brilliant thesis in his *Documentary Classics* that the genre’s trouble with reality, from a very early start, led filmmakers to explore the technical and formal aspect of its own art-form, eventually coming to embrace these obstacles as opening up a creative space between so-called reality and some

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12 In fact, I think it is safe to assume that DuVernay is well aware that her audience is mostly white educated people.

presumptive real. Rothman's conclusion is that these innovations bring the documentary form to the same ontological shores as narrative film.<sup>13</sup> The documentary genre and the narrative genre both realize the need to mess with form, to use the obstacle, the element of fiction or *techné*, in order to access something more real than reality.

So, what does this have to do with the hysteric's discourse? The documentarian, already self-conscious of the obstacle presented by the camera, distrusts the perceived advantage or mandate of their form; they recognize the more masculine and thus unreliable discursive position of the master or the expert—and so they resist. In some form and measure, they simulate the Modernist tradition in literature by foregrounding their own perspective as unreliable. We especially see this in the emergence of personal narrative built from within the story so as to shed light on the very unreliability of the subject matter at hand, as exemplified in the 1985 film *Sherman's March* and, more recently, in the 2012 film *The Stories We Tell*. However, the hysteric's discourse is not relegated to this personal twist in which the filmmaker asserts herself into the film; it can also refer to how the camera and editing techniques are manipulated in order to produce the effect of the undecidable. An early and classic film that assumes this position is Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *A Chronicle of Summer* (1961). If Herzog's film is about the invisible boundary between nature and culture, we can say that Rouch and Morin's film is about the invisible boundary between reality and the real, or between a reality mediated by the presence of a camera and an authentic real, some pure expression of one's inner being. In the beginning of the film, Rouch and Morin express their intentions to a young woman who will play a key role in many of the scenes to follow. Revealing is how they frame this intention to this young woman. They admit in advance that what is at stake is the ability to be authentic: how do we speak honestly when we are self-conscious of being recorded; at what point can we distinguish acting from not-acting; what would count as an authentic moment or emotion? Morin and Rouch occupy the position of the hysteric (the split subject in the upper left corner) in that they seem to delight in the impossibility of their question, as if they know in advance that there is nothing in the big Other that could support or prove the question. The contrast to Herzog waxing poetic about nature's diabolical tendencies and Treadwell's naivete, and Gore's solemn persistence to travel the earth's surface showing the same slideshow over and over is striking. Morin and Rouch simply let the Other speak, capturing the trials and dissatisfaction of their responses with regard to the question. It is an exquisite modernist film in that the cinematic frame is used to expose the limits of the frame itself.

Because of time, I will discuss the scene that exemplifies the hysterical moment par excellence. At the end of the film, after Rouch

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<sup>13</sup> Rothman 2007.

and Morin had gathered together their Parisian subjects for a debriefing session, we see the filmmaker's walking down the hall. Morin says something quite remarkable, "they criticized our characters as not being true to life or else they found them too true." Morin does most of the talking in this sequence and laments that "We're reaching a stage when we question truth which is not everyday truth. As soon as they're more sincere than in life, they're labeled either as hams or as exhibitionists." It seems what Morin is saying here is that authenticity is either indecent (for revealing too much of ourselves) or fake (our true selves are always masked, acted). Rouch does not share equally in this lamentation. He responds by saying, "but people do not always know if they are acting." The key to this ambiguity—the impossible space between inauthenticity and authenticity—is precisely the perceived obstacle; namely, the camera, and how the filmmakers utilize the problem to become the solution. Rothman quotes a subsequence interview that Rouch gave: "We contract time, we extend it, we choose an angle for the shot, we deform the people we're shooting, we speed things up and follow one movement to the detriment of another movement. So, there is a whole work of lies. But, for me, and Edgar Morin at the time we made the film, this lie was more real than the truth."<sup>14</sup> Manipulation, staging, and directing—indeed lying—become necessary in order to expose the gap between phony and less phony; indeed fiction is the condition for the possibility of truth.

Lacan argues that the hysteric's discourse is the only discourse that produces knowledge. Rouch and Morin are not simply addressing a chain of signifiers that produce knowledge, they address the obstacle itself (S1), the point of incommensurability between signifier and signified. In other words, they assume the role of the split subject (\$), interrogate the master's incompetence (the hegemonic narratives of popular cinema), its false satisfaction at the auteur's and audience's expense, and produce a keen insight into the ambiguity of knowledge or mastery itself (S2). But a question lurks: does the knowledge they produce subvert the social link? Might their probing, interrogation, setting snares in order to capture truth in fiction the source of their own enjoyment? The hysteric is satisfied with nothing, but this nothing becomes the source of enjoyment itself, which is why surplus enjoyment occupies the place of truth in the hysteric's discourse.

Alenka Zupančič writes: "The hysterical is the guardian of the negative, of the incommensurable and the impossible. The well-known problem of this stance is that it fails to see that this renunciation and sacrifice themselves very quickly become the source of surplus enjoyment or satisfaction".<sup>15</sup> To what extent does this role of being a guardian of the negative play into and reproduce the contemporary social

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<sup>14</sup> Rothman, p. 70.

<sup>15</sup> Zupančič, p. 167.

link? If the social link is determined by a permanent self-revolutionizing economic order, how might a certain and often *avant-garde* documentary form, loosely associated with Lacan's discourse of the hysteric, be complicit with the reproduction of this very social link? The problem is that while the master-signifier might be exposed for what it is, arbitrary and non-sensical, this exposure is easily reabsorbed as the source of a surplus-enjoyment which, in turn, both feeds the hysterical subject and is subsumed by capital. The social link is not threatened because the arbitrary and non-sensical is something that is already accounted for by cynicism, the ideological antidote to political impotence.<sup>16</sup> When looking at such films as *Sherman's March*, *The Stories We Tell*, and *Chronicle of a Summer*, one cannot help but sense how enjoyment undergirds the performance of the (unreliable) filmmaker(s); indeed, how they get off on their subject.<sup>17</sup> It is for this reason that documentary filmmaking needs to turn an eye towards Lacan and the discourse of the analyst in order to effect or change the coordinates of our current social link.

**Analyst's Discourse:**

a → §  
S1    S2

Agent → Other  
Truth    Product

In a recent paper, I explore in detail how Joshua Oppenheimer's stunning documentary film *The Act of Killing* pulls off the seeming impossible: the making of a film that meets the terms or requirements of Lacan's discourse of the analyst.<sup>18</sup> The key, I argued, was the uncanny coincidence between the actual killers (a handful of militia-like henchmen who participated in the execution of approximately 1.5 million communists, ethnic Chinese, peasants, and land reformers in Indonesia in 1965) agreeing to re-enact their crimes *and* real time interviews of these same killers and others who were associated with the genocide. The juxtaposition between the re-enactment scenes, live interviews, and the creative use of cinematography and editing creates a surrealist landscape of conflicting images and signifiers that create the formal, if not clinical, conditions that allows Oppenheimer to assume the position of the analyst. Not only this, and perhaps more importantly, he

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<sup>16</sup> This might help explain, though admittedly in reductive terms, both the quality and the success of TV programs on platforms like Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu.

<sup>17</sup> This is particularly obvious in Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March*.

<sup>18</sup> Denny 2017.

succeeded, perhaps beyond his own wildest imagination, in manipulating the contents and analyzing the data through the art of editing to create not simply a fever dream<sup>19</sup> but a simulacrum of what Freud called the dream-work. Oppenheimer said in an interview that “the editing is not just about how I’m going to put together a great story out of what I shot or show what happened: it’s an excavation, it’s an analysis of all the data.”<sup>20</sup> As a result, he adds, “All these layers of meaning make the material much smarter than I am.” Oppenheimer succeeds as an analyst by inciting Anwar Congo, the main character and former henchmen, to free associate, to essentially externalize and reproduce his own psychic scars through his acting and rambling interviews (S2). As such, he not only provides an intimate look into the mind of a killer, but this *active mind* becomes a discursive frame to analyze the unconscious knowledge of the event within a broader historical frame, and therein implicate a whole cast of characters who all share a relatively similar relationship to the artful obscenity of rationalization, of white washing, of living with a heinous and obvious crime.

So, how can Oppenheimer's film, especially its technical and formal principles, create a blueprint for other documentary filmmaker's? Enter Louis Theroux's 2015 film *My Scientology Movie*. Theroux, not satisfied with traditional forms of documentary filmmaking, wanted to find a different way to get inside the protective walls of Scientology. He comes across and names the technique as “negative access.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than seeking out information through traditional means—the interview, the cross reference, embellished re-enactments that more often simply convey the director's point of view—Theroux, inspired by Oppenheimer's film, uses the ploy of dramatic re-enactment in order to provoke negative responses, or resistances that disrupt typical modes of understanding. Theroux's method is to produce an unconscious knowledge of the Scientology phenomenon by provoking another scene, one that coughs up signifiers that are otherwise held in check by the typical modes of the documentary form. Tim Robey of *The Daily Telegraph* contrasts Theroux's film from the more methodical *Going Clear* by Alex Gibney, “where Gibney circled the movement right from its beginnings, seeking to analyze its methods and impugn its motives, Theroux just gets right in there and jabs it in the ribs, that imperturbable mask of irony driving its partisans even more bananas than usual.”<sup>22</sup>

As it turns out, the real protagonist (and thus analysand) of the film is David Miscavige's right-hand man (Miscavige is the Church

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<sup>19</sup> A fever dream is how Oppenheimer describes what he feels he has created.

<sup>20</sup> Moore, p. 486.

<sup>21</sup> Theroux 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Robey 2013.

leader, having replaced Ron L Hubbard in 1987, and has been accused of repeated acts of abuse and intimidation on his own followers). This man is Marty Rathbun, a senior executive and inspector General of the church from 1999 to 2004. He left the church in 2004 and has ever since been deemed a 'suppressive person', and who is thus followed and harassed by a shockingly weird special Scientology squad called the squirrel busters.<sup>23</sup> If anyone from the inside could reveal something about the master, David Miscavige, it is Rathbun, whose job entailed the protection and enforcement of doctrine—a job whose methods are precisely those which Miscavige has been accused of abusing. It is Rathbun who functions as the quilting point that holds the entire film together. Without him, the re-enactment scenes are merely gratuitous; a dramatic side-effect.<sup>24</sup> As Theroux says, "it soon became clear that the re-enactments would allow me to question and probe those former Scientologists' versions of event."<sup>25</sup> Testimony from victims is not enough; there is never enough evidence, and nothing but denial from the Scientology camp. By having Rathbun participate in the cast selection for the Miscavige and Tom Cruise roles, as well as writing and directing scenes, we find ourselves more interested in observing Rathbun's reactions to the accuracy of the re-enactments than the acting itself. Not only do his reactions confirm that there were indeed serious abusive techniques being used inside the church so as to break people, but we also observe his own enjoyment in now revealing this secret, as if reliving the enjoyment of standing in for the abusive idiot master himself. His enjoyment seems to undermine his clear conscience.

Where things go slightly off the rails for Rathbun is when a bunch of 'squirrel busters' taunt him by alleging that his own adopted child is really a foster kid who therefore helps him pay the bills. In the very next scene we witness an emotionally distraught Rathbun, saying how Miscavige had to have scripted the entire exchange. Theroux seizes this moment, just as an analyst would who recognizes a narrative discontinuity with his or her analysand, and asks Rathbun why he would be so upset if he in fact used similar techniques with infidels. Rathbun, in turn, becomes irate with Theroux. In this moment Rathbun is exposed as a split subject; we observe a discontinuity between his ego talk (his confident takedown of Scientology) and unconscious desire (the way a signifier, here re-introduced to his own narrative framing, undoes and therein exposes the

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<sup>23</sup> For those of you who have seen the HBO show 'The Leftovers' think of the white cult who called themselves 'the guilty remnant', and whose stone-cold presence was designed to incite memory of the event, and thus guilt.

<sup>24</sup> Though Rathbun and Anwar Congo are very different in terms of culpability, they are interesting to compare. Though Congo openly never renounced his participation with the death squads, he nonetheless admits that he is haunted by them. In this way, the two share a certain proximity to a crime that is inaccessible except through indirect means.

<sup>25</sup> Theroux 2015.

lie of his own self-serving narrative or rationalization, not to mention his own enjoyment in both the handing out of abuse and now his position to expose its injustice). The subject who was once a master of abusing the other is now the object of that same abuse; the letter has returned to its destination. It is a striking moment in the film, one which Peter Bradshaw claims to be "an unsatisfying aspect to the film."<sup>26</sup> But I claim that this is the most satisfying moment. For it is in this moment that we come close to something like the transference, where Theroux, the kind therapist helping Rathbun tell his side of the story, becomes Miscavige (the object *a*), the cause that incites Rathbun's unconscious knowledge to emerge. Indeed, Rathbun becomes the cipher, or the signifier (*S1*) that exposes the lie of Scientology; namely, how the cult-value of Scientology functions as a fetish in order to confer belief in an otherwise arbitrary chain of signifiers (*S2*). Put differently, the transference operates less for Rathbun (he disappears after this encounter) and more for the audience. We observe the agent of knowledge (the one who sheds light onto the Scientology cult) unravel, and in this rupture or discontinuity the real appears precisely as *this* rupture or discontinuity. The truth of Scientology (the *S1* on the lower left corner) is arbitrary, non-sensical and thus inherently violent.

And this is why the ending of Theroux's film is so spot-on. The obscene underside of Scientology is really not that different than any other expression of group psychology or social organization—the social link requires and needs abusive and coercive techniques in order to keep the social tie together. Theroux does well in the end to admit his own attraction to the religion; it's weird blend of science fiction, new age wisdom, and Hollywood glamor. This final admission of Theroux forces the spectator to perhaps or hopefully understand not so much what Scientology is, but how its social link is not that different than their own social ties. Theroux, the analyst, succeeds in shifting our attention from the object of Scientology to the social tie that holds it together, which, in theory, is the condition for the possibility of forming a new social link.

To conclude, I cannot help but think that with Oppenheimer's 2012 film, *The Act of Killing*, a slight alteration in the documentary form presents itself for other filmmakers to adopt. The key is twofold: the first is the use of re-enactment for some scene or event that is laden with a trauma by actual participants of the event in question. The intent is not to use the re-enactment to dramatize or heighten the reality of the event, but to open up discontinuities between the past event narrated (voluntary memory) and the re-enacted event that can cough up a signifier that does not fit, and which thus produces something different or awry. Just like in the psychoanalytic clinic, the key is how surprise or accident (*tuche*) is punctuated by the filmmaker, therein opening up another scene.

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<sup>26</sup> Bradshaw 2016.

The second is what the filmmaker does with the hours upon hours of footage, how he or she uses the art of editing to create an effect (layers of signification) that is similar to Rouch and Morin *but different* in that the object is not to foreground the impossible but to punctuate the slips, discontinuities or gaps between cause and effect in order to cough up something new. This 'something new' represents a stutter in the social link, opening up the possibility for the impossible, the master signifier to be dialecticized so that a new or different social link can be formed.

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