

**forms of truth-telling.
parrhesia and documentary**

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INTRODUCTION

Approaching documentary is not as simple as it may appear. Not only is the term documentary itself highly controversial – is it a genre? a method? an approach? an aesthetic position? a “mode of response to film material?”¹ opposed to fiction? – it also encompasses such a wide range of very diverse formats that it is difficult to get a clear idea of what it actually refers to. For instance, the term may encompass a wide range of filmic practices, from sober television documentaries designed to inform the general public about specific issues, to high-budget blockbusters and entertainment formats produced by the culture industry for mass audiences,

to essayistic or experimental films shown at niche festivals or art galleries, and even to independent militant cinema created as a tool for political education. However, if there is one assumption that is common to all documentaries, it is that they are meant to expose, represent, reveal or problematise reality in order to convey a truth content about it. As Carl Plantinga puts it, “People *do* expect of the documentary that it is intended to offer a reliable record, account of, argument about, or analysis of some element of the actual world, that is, they expect an assertedly veridical representation.”² This inherent claim to a certain veracity has always been central to the understanding of documentary. To be sure, how this truth is to be understood, and how it stands in relation both to reality and to the images and sounds that are used to mediate it, has been a matter of debate ever since John Grierson coined the term in the 1920s and defined it as a “creative treatment of reality.” There is an inherent tension between the direct association of documentaries with the reality they address, often corroborated by the use of indexical audio-visual material, and the filmmaker’s artistic mediation of the empirical material, through which the latter acquires its meaning. What is conveyed in a documentary, however neutral it may appear, is always a product of the subjective mediation of objective facts through the filmmaker’s aesthetic, thematic, and political choices, as well as her use of cinematic techniques such as framing, editing, rhythm, etc. Nevertheless, unlike fiction films that may or may not aim to be truthful, documentaries are essentially understood as a means of “truth telling” through the language of film, be it through affirmative representations of the reality it deals with (its “assertive stance,” as Carl Plantinga puts it),³ or through the problematisation of the real itself, as Jacques Rancière understands its particular agency.⁴ As David LaRocca puts it, “[d]espite its controversial, unsettled status, documentary film restlessly conjures the disclosure of truth by encoding events, experiences, and expressions that we recognize as corresponding to the world (or worlds) we inhabit”⁵ Should it therefore be considered *parrhesiastic*? What would be the conditions of possibility for a *parrhesiastic* documentary? And conversely, can documentaries, as contemporary means of truth-telling, expose anything about the conditions of possibility of *parrhesia* today?

Michel Foucault, who notoriously brought the idea of *parrhesia* back into view in his last lectures, would surely not consider all documentaries as genuine *parrhesiastic* forms. For *parrhesia* is neither truth-telling *per se*, nor is it a specific technique used to produce specific effects, as rhetoric is. Rather, the term refers to a particular modality of truth-telling that relates questions of veridiction to the ethos of the subject, as well as to the reigning power structures. The truth at stake in *parrhesia* is a particular one. It is not a matter of metaphysics or ontology, nor is it a strictly factual knowledge in the scientific sense, but a truth that touches the fields of ethics and politics and directly affects the social existence of both the one who speaks and the one who listens. *Parrhesia* always seeks to have an impact on the ethical conduct of life and the formation of subjects – whence Foucault’s interest in the concept as the first stage of his genealogy of the critical attitude and the practice of truth-telling in Western societies.⁶ What distinguishes *parrhesia* most sharply from other basic modalities of truth-telling – Foucault identifies in ancient Greece that of prophecy, that of wisdom, and that of the technician, expert, or teacher⁷ – is that it necessarily involves a risk for the subject who decides to speak out. “*Parrēsia* is a criticism, it is a criticism, a self-criticism or a criticism oriented towards the others, but always in situations where the speaker is in a position of inferiority to the interlocutor”, Foucault writes. “In *parrēsia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses truth instead of lies, death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and duty instead of interest and selfishness.”⁸ While acknowledging that the various modes of truth-telling never appear in their pure form and are usually intermingled to some extent, Foucault argues that the necessary condition of *parrhesiastic* expression is that it comes with a danger for the *parrhesiast* that the latter knowingly accepts. It presupposes not only courage, but also conviction and the will to change the current situation. Being a *parrhesiast* means fulfilling the moral obligation to speak truth to power in order to challenge the status quo. For contrary to other truth-tellers, the *parrhesiast* “acts not as integrating agent but as disintegrating factor or agent.”⁹ *Parrhesiastic* truth disrupts commonly acknowledged certainties rather than corroborating established norms.

For documentary filmmakers, it is undoubtedly very rare to take any kind of actual risks in order to convey a truth that is not (yet) commonly accepted and susceptible of offending or hurting the spectators. Educational formats, often commissioned by authoritative institutions, appear to be intended to communicate a rather neutral truth for the sake of knowledge transmission, without actually confronting the socio-political conditions in which it is embedded. On the contrary, they inherently endorse the current order of society by accepting the notion of knowledge as one of its separate and detachable components, without addressing their entanglements in the dominant power structures and the ideological agency of their claim to objectivity.¹⁰ Many commercial formats, in turn, are produced by companies seeking audience success and profit. When official instances, populist interests or profit orientation inflict topical choices, formal criteria, and formatting constraints, the result may be interesting, fascinating, enlightening, or entertaining, but it is not *parrhesiastic* in an emphatic sense. Rather than speaking on their own behalf, filmmakers working with such production companies are usually instructed to adapt the forms of conveying content to the prevailing viewing habits, such as the appearance of authenticity or neutrality or the use of certain aesthetic strategies such as emotional music, special effects, normalised narrative patterns or fast cuts to increase the film's attractiveness. But subjection to any authoritative agency is contrary to the ethos of the *parrhesiast*, and the use of codified effects for the purpose of appealing to the spectator is antipodal to *parrhesia* – “[p]arrēsia is external to all the artificial methods of rhetoric.”¹¹ Like the ancient rhetorician, who may or may not speak the truth but always aims to convince his audience, documentary filmmakers who adopt standardised, normalised or artificially spectacular forms to respond to market demands or to produce effects of neutrality may or may not convey the truth – this question is only secondary to the film's achievement. Obviously, the documentary film cannot avoid using rhetorical devices. What conflicts with the idea of *parrhesia* is the use of established rhetorical strategies that aim to evoke affective reactions (“parrēsia is the zero degree of those rhetorical figures which intensify the emotions of the audience,”¹² as Foucault puts it). In a genuinely *parrhesiastic* film,

truth is expressed as frankly and straightforwardly as possible, “without reserve, empty manner of speech, or rhetorical ornament which might encode or hide it,”¹³ because the filmmaker is less concerned with commercial success than with the critical agency of its content, which is the reason for its existence.¹⁴

APPROACHING A CONTEMPORARY PARRHESIAST: LAURA POITRAS’ *CITIZENFOUR*

One of the first cinematic works that come to mind when thinking of the notion of *parrhesia* in the context of documentary filmmaking is surely Laura Poitras’ *Citizenfour*, which has been released in 2014. Certainly, its portrayal of whistle-blower Edward Snowden during the days when he revealed that the US government’s NSA programme had been secretly collecting metadata of citizens demonstrates an example of the “courage to tell the truth” which characterises *parrhesiastes*. Snowden deliberately put his freedom and safety at risk to inform the public about the far-reaching surveillance programmes of the American State that violated privacy rights on a global scale. He understood that speaking out would cause a huge scandal in the media and international relations, and he was perfectly aware that leaking secret information and revealing his identity was likely to lead to his persecution, imprisonment, or forced exile. Nevertheless, he felt the urge to disclose the material to which he had privileged access for the sake of justice, the right to privacy, and the transparency of governmental surveillance strategies. “I am more willing to risk imprisonment, or any other negative outcome personally, than I am willing to risk the containment of my intellectual freedom and that of those others around me whom I care for,” he states in Poitras’s film. He further adds that he does not consider his act as self-sacrifice, because his efforts to promote transparency make him “feel good about [his] human experience.” It was ethically imperative for him to disclose what he knew. Gerald Posselt understands Snowden’s attitude accordingly as an example of the “constitutive connection between *parrhesia* and the care of the self.”¹⁵

What makes Snowden’s case a contemporary example of *parrhesia* is this complexion: he strongly believed in his ethical duty to speak out publicly against

governmental injustice and obfuscation, regardless of the risks he thereby faces, for the good of the society of which he is a part. By showing how principles such as personal rights, transparency, and justice are being undermined by the very government that upholds them as the foundation of democracy, he triggered a global conversation about privacy, surveillance techniques, and civil liberties in both the digital and the analogue socio-political world. Rather than denouncing a singular person or individual fraud, he criticises the systemic abuse of people's rights by the state apparatus, under the pretext of increased security needs. His revelations, generating far-reaching problems in the relationship between the state, tech and other large corporations, and the global population, convey his genuinely critical attitude, understood with Foucault as "the art of voluntary insubordination, ... of reflected intractability,"¹⁶ "of not being governed like that and at that cost ... of not being governed quite so much."¹⁷

While Snowden certainly epitomizes a sort of contemporary *parrhesiast*, it is less obvious to grasp the role that the Poitras' documentary *Citizenfour* plays in the affair. What exactly is the relation between the film and the notion of *parrhesia*? Is it a candid portrayal of a young courageous man, the ethical stance towards the truth that he expresses, his determination to defy his government, and his way of dealing with the dangers he thereby faced? Or does it do something else than to show a fearless subject speaking truth to power? Is it possible, in a way other than as representation, to relate documentary films to *parrhesia*? Laura Poitras was certainly concerned with the critical agency of her film. Many aspects of *Citizenfour* suggest that it is indeed about *parrhesia*. First and foremost, the filmmaker's involvement in the very act of making Snowden's revelations public was undoubtedly crucial. Like Snowden, Poitras took risks when she decided to collaborate with him in this affair, and without a doubt, she was aiming at revealing the truth for the sake of democracy and public rights. Since she had released the first two parts of her trilogy on post-9/11 US strategies in the "war on terror," of which *Citizenfour* is the final part, she had been under surveillance by the US secret services. Her personal ethos as an independent journalist, her experience

with the question of state control and her journalistic research into secret state policies certainly motivated Snowden to choose her as a collaborator. Without the skills and network of Poitras, Glenn Greenwald and Ewen MacAskill, the other independent journalists involved in the affair, who collaboratively leaked the compromising material to the press, it would have been much more difficult to attract public attention on such a large scale.

But on the other hand, the film itself, while making these dangers and entanglements between personal commitment, public responsibility and power structures palpable, relies on a different modality of truth-telling than that of *parrhesia*. The point is not to reveal an embarrassing truth to an interlocutor in a position of superiority. Rather than confronting an authority, *Citizenfour* aims to reach a broad audience of people who have all been betrayed by government initiatives – a community of peers. This is to a certain extent also true for Snowden, whose declarations were transmitted through various international mass media instead of having been directly addressed to his bosses. But Snowden clearly meant to challenge the power structures themselves, including his superiors for whom he had been working for years, knowing that the only possible way to do so consisted in making his claims public. The documentary *Citizenfour*, for its part, was released when the media scandal had already taken place months prior to the film's release, and when the journalists' vulnerability had already been mitigated by the intense media attention of the case. One of the effects of the film is that it has ratified the public awareness of the case. It has kept alive critical debates about state power and privacy, months after the case hit the headlines. But it has done something else as well: it has drawn attention to the human aspect of the *parrhesiastic* act. While the media spectacle surrounding the scandal has completely overshadowed what made Snowden a *parrhesiast* – his genuine ethics, his humility, his determination – the documentary takes us back to the fragile situation when it was still uncertain what would happen. *Citizenfour* captures the personal dimension of the complex process of unravelling what the US government tried to withhold from the public. The documentary exposes

the precarious conditions under which Snowden's courageous disclosure came into being and deploys the safeguards and the sensitive construction of trustful relationships on which it depended. In a way, it shows the flip side of the media-spectacle, the backdrop of the scandalous revelations in the news: the delicate correspondence between Snowden and Poitras, which required a high level of encryption and enhanced security measures, the intensity of the personal pressure on everyone involved, and the complex global imbrications that needed to be considered for it to happen. Without psychologising or biographical storytelling, Poitras' film draws a sympathetic picture of Snowden's personality, his ethical integrity, humility, and respectable intentions, through their encounters online and in person, in a hotel room in Hong Kong. Eschewing spectacular formal means, *Citizenfour* is remarkably sober: the setting is unpretentious, no special effects, dramatic music scores or other cinematic devices to heighten suspense are employed. Still, the film manages to appeal to a wide audience. *Citizenfour* was not only granted more than 30 awards, including the prestigious Academy Award for the Best Documentary Feature in 2015, but also had a real box office success. In the reviews that appeared in the press, the documentary is often described as extremely suspenseful, with many commentators equating it to an espionage thriller or a dystopian horror film.¹⁸ On that point, Poitras herself asserts:

... while I'm not bending my practice to speak to that audience, or making compromises, it does have the potential to reach a popular audience. And I love that. What's so beautiful about cinema is that it's a populist medium. *Citizenfour* fits within a long tradition of Hollywood films about the individual against the state.¹⁹

Indeed, her documentary fits a recurring figure in fiction cinema, and yet it does not quite fit. Snowden appears both as a hero who risks his life for his moral convictions and as an ordinary, modest, easily accessible twenty-something guy who does not want to be the centre of attention. Poitras blurs the lines between Hollywood tropes and actual people in real circumstances. Her film is at the same time a sensitive portrait of a contemporary *parrhesiast*, seen through the eyes of

one of his allies, and a discreet problematisation of the conditions of privacy and political dissent in times of digital surveillance by those in power. Undoubtedly, *Citizenfour* conveys something about *parrhesia*, its conditions and risks in contemporary societies, in which governmentality surreptitiously permeates private life. Freed from the pressure to get information out quickly under the most precarious of conditions, and suspending the clamour of media spectacle, Poitras' documentary opens up a space for reflection on the relationship between power, truth and subjective action. *Citizenfour* shifts the focus from *parrhesia* as such to its conditions of possibility in times of digital surveillance.

THE FILMMAKER AS *PARRHESIAST*: RENÉ VAUTIER, JAN NĚMEC, AND RADICAL FILMMAKING

There are some examples of more directly *parrhesiastic* films. The figure of the documentary filmmaker as *parrhesiast*, and of filmic language as a vehicle for the expression of subjective convictions for the sake of engaging the viewer, has taken various forms in the history of documentary. René Vautier's 1950 short documentary *Afrique 50* is a paradigmatic example. Vautier, a former active militant in the *Résistance* against the German occupation, was commissioned by the official French *Ligue de l'Enseignement* to make an educational film about "real life" in the African colonies. He was instructed to provide a positive representation of the living conditions of the inhabitants of several West-African colonies, but quickly realised that the situation was in fact all but disastrous for locals. Rather than projecting a propagandistic image of French humanism and charity, as required by the authorities, he decided to turn his lens on the inhumane conditions and the violent oppression and exploitation to which the population was subjected by the colonial power. Filming such scenes was a deliberate act of dissidence, and their association with a personal commentary linking the images to the de facto violence and structural racism of the French administration, only enhanced the subversive agency of Vautier's film. The voice-over directly addresses the public, stressing that these atrocities are being committed for the sake of France's wealth, and that turning a blind eye to this appalling situation makes

the audience complicit in the government's abuses. Vautier's film confronts the French authorities for their racist colonial behaviour and blatant, hypocritical propaganda, and the spectators for their silent acceptance of the unacceptable state of affairs. Reputed to be the first French anti-colonial film, *Afrique 50* is a critical mirror for the French government and population. For 40 years it was banned in France, and Vautier was sentenced to prison for illegal filming and for retaining confiscated reels. Although he knew what he was risking by filming, he continued to make documentaries about the atrocities of the French colonialists. A few years later, he joined the Algerian independence fighters of the FLN in clandestinity in order to document their struggle and bring it to the attention of an international audience. Another example of *parrhesiastic* filmmaking is Jan Němec's *Oratorio for Prague* released in 1968. Like Vautier, Němec paid dearly for his courage: his film was immediately prohibited by the authorities, and Němec was banned from making films and forced into exile in 1974. *Oratorio for Prague* was initially intended to document the peaceful demonstrations of the Prague Spring, in which the filmmaker took an active part. More than half the film follows those demonstrating for freedom and the visionary politicians involved. But the voice-over narration makes it clear from the outset that their optimism was short-lived, and that the planned reforms of democratisation, economic decentralisation, and civil rights would be brutally repressed by the Soviet military. The film's footage, shot on the ground as the events unfolded, reveals the violent crackdown on the demonstrators and the invasion by heavily armed Soviet soldiers. Both films reveal the attempts of those in power to conceal the violent nature of their rule and the repression of the people in draconian ways. In both instances, the filmmakers refused to be intimidated, confronted the authorities directly and felt morally obliged to intervene in the situation by releasing their films. Both films combine audiovisual material shot on location with a subjective voice-over commentary explaining its critical pertinence.

The use of documentary as an audio-visual language to confront power structures through cinematic means became an important tool in the politically charged

landscape of the 1960s and 1970s, when a wave of radical documentary filmmakers from both the Global South and the so-called First World emerged as strong voices of dissent against the domination of neo-colonialism, capitalism, and hegemonic forms of politics and culture. In the crisis-ridden world of the cold war, anticolonial struggles, and global conflicts, alternatives to the dominant power constellation seemed as possible as desirable, and independent filmmakers understood their activity as part of the struggles to which they were committed. Many of these filmmakers used the medium of film in a subversive manner, not only to critique the mechanisms of oppression that perpetuate racial inequality, political and economic domination by imperialist powers, and the continued exploitation of people in the Third World, but also to challenge the hegemony of dominant imagery that shapes our perception of reality through radical formal experiments. The question of form – of how and through which artistic means to mediate dissenting content – became increasingly central to counter the instrumentalisation of mass media for political ends. Activists, artists and independent filmmakers criticized the pretensions of official representations of reality to be neutral vehicles of truth and countered hegemonic audiovisual policies with strategies such as the use of radical montage techniques to relate separate elements and construct different meanings, and the dissociation of direct sound from images to generate critical distance.

An important film in this regard is Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968). Both experimental agit-prop documentary and essay film, it exposes the multiple facets of neo-colonialist violence in Argentina and abroad through a radical montage of heterogeneous material such as archival footage, clandestinely recorded material, political analysis, quotations of revolutionaries like Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Aimé Césaire, and satire. *La hora de los hornos* offers a fundamental critique of global capitalism and imperialism, revealing the systemic dimension of neo-colonial oppression through instances of everyday violence in Latin America, in three parts that together run over four hours. The explicit aim is – akin to Brecht's

theatre – to activate the audience, challenging the passive position into which they are conditioned by many other cinematic productions, including Hollywood movies and *cinéma d'auteur*. “The film mobilizes, fostering motor and mental activity rather than self-indulgent fantasy,”²⁰ as Robert Stam writes. “The spectator is taught to distrust images or, better, to see through them to their underlying structures. The film strives to enable the spectator to penetrate the veil of appearances, to dispel the mists of ideology through an act of revolutionary decoding.”²¹ Indeed, because it intervened directly in the realm of representation and was thus capable of disrupting it from within, documentary film was a powerful means of conveying truth for Solanas, Getino and many other radical filmmakers of the time. A critical practice of truth-telling through audiovisual means, capable of engaging interlocutors not only through persuasive rational argumentation but also through sensitive provocation of normalised perceptions of reality, was called for to transform society on a global scale. The rhetorical strategies of leading media were directly targeted and exposed in their system-preserving bias by films like *La hora de los hornos*. Only when that which appears natural, unavoidable or unquestionable is problematised in its very appearance, only when the correlation between a standardised perception of something as real and the political effectiveness of a ruling system is cracked open, they argued, would people be able to grasp the whole complex of socio-economic and political intricacies in which they are caught and seriously question their place in the world. The way in which truth could be conveyed would be transformative, through dissenting ways of showing, addressing and reflecting reality.

CRITIQUE IN CRISIS

Meanwhile, much of the confidence in the disruptive agency of audiovisual production has been frustrated in neoliberal democracies worldwide. With the transformations of the geopolitical situation since the struggles for independence and the cold war have come to an end, the conditions for critical filmmaking have fundamentally changed. After the former colonies gained independence, hopes for new forms of living together beyond the dominant social organizations embodied

by the superpowers – neoliberal capitalism and Soviet-style communism – quickly faded as most of the newly created nations adopted their models or ended up as dictatorships. When the world was divided into superpowers, each interested in promoting its own form of government as superior to the other, the endeavours of radical filmmakers to convey oppositional truths were perceived as a threat to the dominant powers. *Parrhesia* through the means of film was possible when it was likely to generate dissent and impact the political and moral understanding of people on both sides of the Iron Curtain. But since the end of the Cold War, the global embrace of capitalism and neoliberalism has diminished the threat of an imminent overthrow by ideological opponents. What used to be considered acceptable or offensive by state power structures is now more than ever a question of economic success. At the same time, as Stoffel Debuysere writes,

[t]he overflow of democratic mass individualism, that which the 1968 generation was supposedly seeking all along, has allegedly culminated in an infinite drift of narcissistic consumers who do not care for anything but the instant satisfaction of their own needs and desires: this is the narrative that the contemporary left has embraced. The same criticism that used to denounce the society of the spectacle and the mythology of consumer ideologies in view of possible change had started to turn on itself, trapping itself in an endless vicious cycle in which the power of the market can no longer be distinguished from the power of its denunciation.²²

What is more, the very idea of critique in audiovisual media has been absorbed into the realm of mainstream media. As virtually any subject, no matter how shocking, provocative, or otherwise disturbing, has been assimilated by what Adorno and Horkheimer called the culture industry, and as radical formal means have been integrated into the normalised catalogue of stylistic devices and are now perfectly compatible with popular documentaries, independent oppositional filmmaking is losing more and more of its agency to unsettle the viewer.²³ What once had the potential to disrupt has now become one rhetorical device among others, turning “criticism” in audiovisual media into a sometimes more, sometimes less attractive feature in mainstream media and hollowing it out in the process. In a recent

publication with the evocative title *Kill the Documentary*, filmmaker and author Jill Godmillow articulates a harsh indictment of what she calls conventional or liberal documentary formats, or DAWKI, “documentary as we know it.” With such films, she writes, “we are securely ensconced in spectacle,”²⁴ as they “produce a common mindset, an egotism that eternally places the citizen/viewer at the center of the universe, looking out into the represented world, discovering the problems of other people. It’s a kind of cultural imperialism, as if our knowledge exempts us from having had any part of damage we find there.”²⁵ Many documentaries shown on big screens, Internet platforms or streaming services fall into this category, reproducing common schemes of reality perception. The effect of such documentary formats is diametrically opposed to that of *parrhesia*, even if their purpose is to uncover alarming content: Rather than prompting the interlocutor to reflect on and question their own existence as a subject within society, and to question the power relations in which they are trapped, they comfort them in their privileged, passive, self-righteous position.

By contrast, “what makes [something] *parrēsia*”, writes Foucault, “is that the introduction, the irruption of the true discourse determines an open situation, or rather opens the situation and makes possible effects which are, precisely, not known. *Parrēsia* does not produce a codified effect; it opens up an unspecified risk.”²⁶ *Parrhesia* necessarily bears a transformative potential; it intervenes in a particular historical situation so as to affect the interlocutor as an ethical person and to generate change. It is important to remind that the idea of *parrhesia* is not only bound up with the figure of the *parrhesiast* as a courageous, sincere, and virtuous subject – a figure that has arguably been assimilated in many commercially oriented documentaries, such as Michael Moore’s films – but also with the particular moment in which dominant ideas are challenged through the intercession of her truth-telling. This latter aspect is also emphasised by Godmillow, who stubbornly continues to advocate documentaries capable of critical truth telling and transformative effects. She calls them post-realist documentaries, and describes them as “performative utterances, acts of resistance,

and aesthetic rejoinders to a world drowning in its own image.”²⁷ Such critical documentaries “disrupt and destroy the ‘you’ that the conventional documentary has nurtured for so long.”²⁸ They “always seek ... to crack the code of the status quo, to drill even small holes in our social imaginaire, our naturalized worldview that suggests what is understood as normal, reasonable, commonsensical, and generally accepted by all.”²⁹ In her book, Godmillow provides a wide range of very diverse examples of such inherently critical films from different historical times and geographical contexts. Many of them can be approached to the concept of *parrhesia*, not necessarily because their makers risked their life, but because they bear a potential to appeal to their audience through disquieting truths that affect them directly. What they all have in common, though, is that their forms are anything but ready-made rhetorical devices.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO THE *PARRHESIASTIC* GAME

Today, it is important to consider not only socio-political conditions but also the crisis of the notion of truth and the changing status of images. With the production of audiovisual documents no longer limited to professionals, viewers are now potential producers who are aware of the technical possibilities to fabricate, fake, and distort images. The widespread use of smartphones allows anyone to record images and sounds, combine different files, reappropriate or manipulate existing documents, and upload or share them publicly on the Internet. Meanwhile, the difference between mere opinion and truth is becoming increasingly blurred in public discourse. This raises the question of how documentaries can remain disruptive and avoid being lost in the maelstrom of seemingly equivalent positions. At stake today is not only the question of truth as such, but also that of its potency. In his documentary *The Viewing Booth* (2019), Israeli filmmaker Ra’anan Alexandrowicz problematises the potential to engage viewers through the use of raw documentary footage alongside questions of trust in media images. In his film, Alexandrowicz invites a young student, Maia Levy, to watch and comment on several Palestinian videos shot in collaboration with the Israeli human rights organisation Bet’selem and published on Youtube.

The setup is simple: the filmmaker sits in a small room in front of two screens, while Maia is shown another computer in a separate room, presumably used for dubbing. Maia, daughter of Israeli parents and very “pro-Israeli,” as she says in the film, reads most of the images as fictions designed to manipulate the viewer. She is convinced that the most disturbing scenes were staged for the purposes of anti-Israeli propaganda, and remains very critical of what she sees, refusing to be affected by it in her perception of the situation on the ground in the West Bank. When Alexandrowicz asks her to return for a second viewing, this time of the recordings of herself watching the YouTube videos, her attitude toward the images has become even more unrelenting. Maia’s reactions and reflections are interspersed with conversations and debates she has with the director about the nature of documentary filmmaking, the reliability of visual evidence, and the role of empathy in understanding complex socio-political issues. It is becoming increasingly clear that it is impossible to find common ground to discuss the truth of the matter, and the one who is being challenged is Alexandrowicz himself. As a former Israeli soldier who had experienced very similar scenes, and as a political filmmaker who had made several critical documentaries about the Israeli occupation of Palestine, he was convinced of the transformative power of documentary material. Maia’s reactions demonstrate to him that neither the visual content nor witness accounts have enough compelling power to break through the belief systems that determine what is considered real and what is not. The film’s focus on the violent oppression of Palestinians by the Israeli military occupation is overshadowed by the question of the feasibility of political filmmaking in an era where viewers are increasingly critical of the indexical image and its potential for conveying some kind of factual truth. What is emerging more clearly is the question as to how a basis can be built for the perception of objective conditions beyond ideological divisions, and how the audience’s willingness to deal ethically with complicated truths can be aroused.

What can the widespread doubt about both the representation of reality and reality itself teach us about the challenges to the concept of *parrhesia* today? It may be

productive to shift the focus from the person of the *parrhesiast* to his interlocutor. Foucault notes that it is indeed the auditor that grants the *parrhesiast* the right to free speech. The *parrhesiastic* game, as Foucault calls it, remains impotent if the audience does not recognise it as such:

For if the parrhesiast is someone who, by telling the truth, the whole truth, regardless of any other consideration, risks bringing his relationship to the other into question, and even risks his life, on the other hand, the person to whom this truth is told – whether this is the assembled people deliberating on the best decisions to take, or the Prince, the tyrant or king to whom advice must be given, or the friend one is guiding – this person (people, king, friend), if he wants to play the role proposed to him by the parrhesiast in telling him the truth, must accept the truth, however much it may hurt generally accepted opinion in the Assembly, the Prince's passions or interests, or the individual's ignorance or blindness. The people, the Prince, and the individual must accept the game of *parrēsia*; they must play it themselves and recognize that they have to listen to the person who takes the risk of telling them the truth. Thus the true game of *parrēsia* will be established on the basis of this kind of pact which means that if the parrhesiast demonstrates his courage by telling the truth despite and regardless of everything, the person to whom this *parrēsia* is addressed will have to demonstrate his greatness of soul by accepting being told the truth.³⁰

The audience of a documentary has to engage in the “*parrhesiastic* bond” that binds both the speaker and the listener to the truth. This requires an attitude that differs significantly from the passive mindset of the consumer: it involves courage and openness on the part of the person to whom the truth is addressed, a “courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears.”³¹ Listeners must be prepared to take the truth seriously as something that affects them directly. In many parts of the world, speaking truth to power, whether through films that directly address reality or through public speech, remains dangerous. In countries

like Iran, Syria, Russia, North Korea and China, censorship and persecution is a brutal reality. Despite the risks, courageous filmmakers have insisted on bringing the unvarnished truth they believe in to light and calling for radical change. Yet even supposedly liberal countries like Germany and the United States censor or cancel the screening of documentaries, especially those that address the situation of Palestinians in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. A case in point is the American documentary “Israelism,” about the growing shift in attitudes toward Israel among young Jewish Americans who have been raised to be patriotic defenders of Israel, whose screening has been cancelled on numerous occasions in both countries. To be sure, this tendency is not limited to documentary formats, rather it seems to be a general trend of “philosemitic McCarthyism,”³² as Susan Neiman aptly calls it. Yet, censorship and cancellations demonstrate that such forms of truth-telling are still perceived as significant, and their impact is judged as potential challenges to an existing order. However, if the truth presented in documentary formats is deemed irrelevant because neither the addressed authorities nor the concerned viewers are affected by the films in any other way than a consumerist one, the concept of *parrhesia* (and with it the idea of a critical attitude opened up by audiovisual productions) becomes superfluous.

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NOTES

1. Dai Vaughn, "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity." In *For Documentary*, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1999, 54-83, 58.
2. Carl Plantinga, "What Documentary Is, After All." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63:2 (Spring 2005, 105-117, 112).
3. In the article "Documentary," Plantinga writes: "In nonfiction, the filmmaker takes the assertive stance, presenting states of affairs as occurring in the actual world. Thus the characteristic illocutionary act of the documentary filmmaker is to present the world of the work assertively." In *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, eds. Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga, London & New York: Routledge, 2009, 494-504, 498.
4. Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*. Trans Emiliano Battista, Oxford & New York: Berg, 2006, 17-8.
5. David LaRocca, "Introduction: Representative Qualities and Questions of Documentary Film." In *The Philosophy of Documentary Film. Image, Sound, Fiction, Truth*, ed. David LaRocca, Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2016, 1-54, 45.
6. Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago, 2019, 63.
7. *Ibid.*, 15.
8. *Ibid.*, 46.
9. *Ibid.*, 65.
10. See: Stefanie Baumann, "Images of the Real. Introductory Notes 1." *Cinema – Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image*, 12 (2020, 8-21).
11. Foucault, *Discourse and Truth*, 30.
12. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*. Ed. Joseph Pearson, Los Angeles: Sémiotext(e), 2001, 21.
13. Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government Of Self And Others II: Lectures At The Collège de France 1983-1984*. Eds. Frédéric Gros, François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, Arnold I. Davidson & Graham Burchell, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011, 10.
14. This was also the aim of the documentary *Les Prisons aussi*, directed by Héléne Chatelain and René Lefort in the Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons, which Foucault had co-founded in 1971. See also *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group [1970–1980]*. Eds. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020.
15. Gerald Posselt, "Self-Care and Truth-Telling: Rethinking Care with Foucault." *Le foucaldien* 7:1 (2021, 1–15, 12).
16. Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" In *The Politics of Truth*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1997, 32.
17. *Ibid.*, 29.
18. See for example A. O. Scott, "Intent on Defying an All-Seeing Eye: 'Citizenfour,' a Documentary about Edward J. Snowden." *New York Times*, October 23, 2014; Scott Macaulay, "In the Eye of the Storm: Laura Poitras on CITIZENFOUR." *Filmmaker Magazine*, October 20, 2014; Richard Corliss, "Citizenfour is Hollywood's Scariest Chiller," *Times*, October 26, 2014; see also the reviews section on the website of the film <https://citizenfourfilm.com/reviews>, accessed on August 2 2023.
19. Hito Steyerl and Laura Poitras, "Techniques of the Observer. Hito Steyerl and Laura Poitras in Conversation." *Artforum International* 53:9 (2015, 306-317, 313).
20. Robert Stam, "The Two Avant-gardes: Solanas and Getino's *The Hour of the Furnaces*." In *Documenting the Documentary. Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, eds. Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014, 271-286, 274.
21. *Ibid.*, 276.

22. See Stoffel Debuysere, "Notes on Militant Cinema (1967-1977)." available online: <https://www.diagonalthoughts.com/?p=2075>, accessed August 2, 2023.
23. See Stefanie Baumann, "How to Mediate Reality: Thinking Documentary Film with Adorno and Horkheimer." In *How to Critique Authoritarian Populism. Methodologies of the Frankfurt School*, ed. Jeremiah Morelock, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2021, 412-430.
24. Jill Godmillow, *Kill the Documentary: A Letter to Filmmakers, Students, and Scholars*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022, 12.
25. *Ibid.*, 22.
26. Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982-1983*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 62.
27. Jill Godmillow, *Kill the Documentary*, 32.
28. *Ibid.*, 25.
29. *Ibid.*, 31
30. Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 12-13.
31. *Ibid.*, 13.
32. Susan Neiman, "Historical Reckoning Gone Haywire." *The New York Review*, October 19, 2023, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2023/10/19/historical-reckoning-gone-haywire-germany-susan-neiman/?srsltid=AfmBOoqO9SXQcNUgwHfqizhWsYAQSLf61v_vAT6o67vdhYpRnOlJybZy