For a Critique of the Documentary Logic of Sobriety

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According to a certain narrative that continues to orient contemporary debates regarding the politics of aesthetic practice, the value and meaning of “seriousness” is conceived in antipathy to realism. Within this narrative, which is informed by the tenets of both Marxism and modernism, institutional recognition, affective gravitas, intellectual weight, and symbolic (if not economic) capital—in short, all of the cultural privileges and honors of seriousness—accrue to those representational forms that self-consciously display their distance from the real. These are the forms that, per Alain Badiou, stage the “vanishing difference” between representation and the real, treating the aesthetic itself as the most serious domain of practice.¹

Seriousness is routinely invoked as a means of arguing for the political value of modern forms, in contradistinction with those degraded ideological forms that operate by erasing their own aesthetic marks, driven as they are by a misdirected and destructive “passion for the real.”² Paradoxically, seriousness is also the modernizing procedure par excellence, through which the hierarchy of a dominant discourse has been displaced by oppositional practices that always seem, at first, to be unserious, popular, or too close to the real: sobriety, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari remind us, is the final and most effective frontier of minoritarian flight.³ Indeed, we can trace the dialectical movement of contemporary thought through this rejuvenating operation as it paves a path for the degraded other in every binary opposition to be taken seriously: high modernism versus political, vernacular, and pop modernisms; critical theory versus cultural studies; art versus cinema; cinema versus television, and so on.

What is intriguing about this deconstructive maneuver is that seriousness must itself be placed under erasure wherever it is deployed as a technique of legitimation. This is perhaps most clearly observed in recent work revealing that to take humor seriously is also to show what is laughable about high seriousness.⁴ Seriousness crumbles under its own scrutiny. We can deduce from this that seriousness is a highly ambivalent and volatile discourse—one that forcefully calls up the raw urgency and physicality of the real (hence its associations with death, mortality, and finitude), even as it distances itself from such instances of the real, impelled as it is by the imperatives of criticality and disillusionment. Its capacity to revitalize thought pivots on a negation of the real that otherwise lingers as an unwelcome reminder of the proximity of modern forms to the object of their derision.

Discourses of Sobriety

To better understand how the realist entanglements of seriousness are articulated in relation to its modernizing logic, we may do well to consult a form whose evolution and itineraries are symptomatic of its contradictions: documentary.

One of the early theorist-practitioners of documentary, John Grierson, writing in 1942, influentially located the genre’s specificity in its “anti-aesthetic” imperative.⁵ The goal of documentary, as Grierson saw it, was to frame the pressing social problems of the time—such as unemployment, homelessness, poverty, and hunger—in a direct, immediate, and didactic fashion that brushed aside efforts to contemplate form or aesthetic value. Grierson’s favored idiom, the expository voice-over, has often been derided as uncinematic, propagandistic, and redundant—the “last resort of the incompetent”—because it forcefully negated its own source, materiality, and embodiment to make the case that aesthetic and even ideological considerations should be subordinated to, and in service
of the serious matter of serving a “social purpose.” In a much later work, Bill Nichols would describe the Griersonian approach to documentary as a “discourse of sobriety.” The seriousness of this documentary mode, that is, its “air of sobriety,” Nichols argued, stems from its kinship with the positivist discourses of science, policy, education, economics, warfare, and the like, which aim to “effect action and entail consequences” in the real world. “Discourses of sobriety,” Nichols writes, “are sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, transparent. Through them, power exerts itself. Through them, things are made to happen.”

Nichols’s articulation of the documentary impulse of sobriety has now attained canonical status in studies of the genre. But even as the battles rage on regarding the partiality of his assessment of documentary’s purview and compass, there exists a tacit consensus, guided, no doubt, by Nichols’s own formalist inclinations, regarding its scope as an ideological commentary on documentary form. The notion of sobriety, it is assumed, simply offers a critique of the unconscious protocols of dry objectivity and proof (derived from the narrative conventions of the newsreel, scientific study, ethnographic account, etc.) that invest the formal conventions of documentary realism with the impression of authentic truth, and which have motivated such descriptions of documentary as Grierson’s “creative treatment of actuality,” Dziga Vertov’s Kino-Pravda (“Camera-Truth”), or Jean Rouch’s “cinema-sincerity.” Under the influence of this reading, the history of documentary is told as an evolutionary narrative that charts its progressive disillusionment, enlightenment, and modernization through formal innovation. Documentary, we are told, has now shed the shackles of sobriety. Liberated from the anti-aesthetic domain of denotation, education, exposition, or information, documentary has become formally reflexive, and self-conscious regarding its ideological content. It has embraced pleasure, sobriety’s nemesis, in the form of the performative, the emotional, the erotic, and the personal, ushering in a new era of “anti-documentary” exhibitionism, entertainment, intimacy, and play.

And yet, in its eagerness to distance itself from seriousness and its realist traps, this narrative fails to seriously acknowledge the latter’s propulsive and ambivalent role in the tale of documentary’s discursive liberation. Where does seriousness inhere after the reflexive turn in documentary form? Is there a logic connecting its retrenchments and refusals? If we approach Nichols’ statement as a window onto the ethical—rather than ideological—underpinnings of documentary’s interventionist aims, then the answers to these questions emerge in a form that allows us to trace the uncertain but vexing contours of a political economy of sobriety.

**Humanitarian Returns**

From the formal standpoint that typically orients the study of the documentary mode, the social issue documentary, the ethnographic film, and “committed” or political cinema—the ur-discourses of the “serious” documentary—are seen as distinct historical sub-genres with their individual aesthetic, thematic, and ideological concerns. But from an ethical vantage point, the history of the documentary mode can instead be seen as a series of variations and transformations of departures from, and returns to the mission of the humanitarian media intervention. Whether we trace its origins to Grierson’s concern for the “social victim,” or to Robert Flaherty’s desire to give voice to the ethnographic native, or to the Soviet preoccupation with representing the struggles of exploited workers, the aesthetic comportment of seriousness is inextricable from the urgent task of rescuing the other from the discursive death of invisibility and marginalization. The discourse of sobriety appears from this perspective not merely as an ideological ruse, but as the symptom and mandate of a humanitarian ethical paradigm—one in which the urgent, immediate task of saving human lives legitimates and even actively defers all other considerations, including the aesthetics and politics of representation. As a medial idiom in which aesthetic concerns are subordinate to the task of
touching the real, documentary realism is uniquely aligned with the ethics of humanitarian intervention.

In humanitarian ethics, the volunteer’s decision to potentially sacrifice his own life is understood as a radical reassertion of the value of the life that has been forsaken. At the same time, the humanitarian wager—of placing politically meaningful life in the vulnerable position of “bare” life, in the interest of evidencing their shared ethical basis—also evidences the rationality of the modern ethical paradigm that underlies the emergence of the discourse of human rights, as well as the concept of “humanity” as a general equivalence encompassing all human beings. As an instantiation of humanitarian intervention in the expanded sense, the sacrifice of the “serious” documentary filmmaker bearing witness to the excluded other makes it possible to envision that abstract equivalence in concrete, aesthetic terms: the ethos of sobriety calls on the documentarist to “give up” the solipsistic pleasures of artistic abstraction, ambiguity, evocation, complexity, and play in order to evolve a sober aesthetic of immediacy, spontaneity, denotation, actuality, transparency, and instrumentality.

The aesthetic imperfection, poverty, and disposability of the discourse of sobriety indicates that its value is conceived in terms of immediate use rather than exchange or pleasure; it calls for a return to primitive, essential, and basic concerns. Such aesthetic austerity performs the filmmaker’s solidarity and commitment to the grim realities of the other’s (perceived) impoverishment, and demands an analogous sacrifice of the viewer’s spectatorial pleasure. In this regard, we might say that documentary sobriety works in the manner of a performative utterance, by promising to solemnly “commit” its spectator to the reality of the other, even though the very notion of performativity is counter-intuitive to the semantic register of seriousness. These are the commitments that continued to orient the inheritors of the serious tradition in subsequent decades, including in certain strains of observational cinema, Third Cinema, and early feminist documentaries.

Today, it is widely believed that documentary and its audiences have developed a critical relationship to the form’s humanitarian aims. As proof, it is pointed out that the historical enunciators of documentary sobriety (such as the expository voice-over, the long-take, the wide-angle shot, shallow focus, hand-held camerawork, direct address, minimal editing, sync sound, and the avoidance of non-diegetic sound) are no longer stable in their meaning. The transformation of the institutional, spectatorial, and textual contexts that once underpinned the interpretation of these formal conventions as signifiers of real, unvarnished life has meant that films originally prized for their social or political use-value are now exhibited and studied for their aesthetic innovations in museums and classrooms. In the aftermath of the progressive social movements of the twentieth century, as well as concomitant technical advances impacting the access and authorship of documentary media, the traditional genres of the serious documentary, it is pointed out, have also been superseded by their reflexive counterparts, as the former “others” of documentary progressively step up to the camera to “tell their own stories,” in the form of feminist, queer, and autoethnographic reinterpretations of documentary. The audiovisual language of sobriety has become integrated into the repertoires of experimental, fiction, amateur, and art film, even as the successors of the sober form evince the ongoing merger of documentary aesthetics with these other genres.

And yet, documentary perseveres in its sober calling, even as it is argued to have become thoroughly modern. In the era of the politically and formally reflexive documentary, the anti-aesthetic ethic of sobriety may have its ultimate retrenchment in the human rights documentary. The interventionist aims of this genre range in scope from the broad goals of public enlightenment and awareness to the narrower aims of facilitating pedagogy, advocating policy change, or soliciting charitable
donations. What remains constant, however, is the generic association of sobriety with a revolving cast of characters, settings, and topics that represent excluded, abjected humanity: the sweatshop, the child soldier, the detention camp, human trafficking, the Third World slum, indigenous people, torture, political repression, the disaster zone, the illegal immigrant, the severely disabled, etc.

The language of sobriety encountered in contemporary human rights media continues to evolve in conjunction with the ongoing merger between media genres, as well as other discursive and technological transformations. The humanitarian aesthetic routinely fuses observational filming techniques with character-driven “personal” narration, sentimental scoring, and televisual editing. Additionally it is characterized by such tropes as the close-up of the human face, eyes, or hands; the respectfully distant shot of laboring brown bodies; the inclusion of amateur or surveillance footage, often of a low resolution; and the emotive use of “world music.” The result is an eminently pre-coded and stylized but self-effacing idiom that nonetheless denotes “humanity.”

The onus of conveying this basic sense of humanity as the lowest common denominator joining filmmaker, subject, and audience often rests with the narrating voice. The prescribed tropes of intimacy and personal connection that have arguably become the lingua franca of the documentary funding and festival circuit bear even more heavily upon the “I” of the humanitarian narrative, which is seldom complicated, capricious, or idiosyncratic. As Paromita Vohra notes, this “smoothening ‘I’ confirms the political reliability of the narrator, affirms their locus standi to tell us a general story about their culture.”

It is implied that complicated subjectivities and idiomatic styles of filmmaking would make such “international” stories impenetrable to their (Western) audiences—an aesthetic risk whose stakes grow exponentially higher when actual lives are believed to hang in the balance. The humanitarian mores of aesthetic denial are consequently strictly policed and thoroughly internalized: the direr the circumstances, the more understated the aesthetic. The right balance and a light touch are required. Too much or too little can result in a charge of aestheticization or pornography, both of which reveal seriousness to be of a performative rather than constative order. These moments, when sobriety misses its mark and shifts attention from the documentary’s referent to the “frivolous” work of the signifier, are frequently interpreted as an ethical breach.

**Economies of the Poor Image**

In a critique of observational and ethnographic realism written over two decades ago, Trinh T. Minh-ha poses a set of questions that offer compelling provocations regarding the anti-aesthetic imperative of documentary sobriety:

> Some filmmakers will not hesitate to [say] that the aesthetic quality of the visuals is of secondary importance. No Art here. A beautiful shot is apt to lie, while a bad shot ‘is a guarantee of authenticity,’ one that loses in attractiveness but gains in truth. Which truth, finally? And which reality, when ‘life’ and ‘art’ are perceived dualistically as two mutually exclusive poles? When *dead*, shallow, unimaginative images are validated on pre-text of their ‘capturing life directly?’ It is, perhaps, precisely the claim to catch life in its motion and show it ‘as it is’ that has led a great number of ‘documentarians’ not only to present ‘bad shots,’ but also to make us believe that life is as dull as the images they project on the screen.14

For some, Trinh’s comments regarding the poverty and shallow depth of the sober documentary image (or what she simply refers to as “bad shots”) may seem to evoke what the visual artist and critic Hito Steyerl has defended as the disruptive political economy of “the poor image.”15 Steyerl
employs this term to refer to the impoverishment of the cinematic image in the era of digital reproduction, in which high-resolution “originals” circulate freely as degraded, illicit, low-resolution copies and rips. Whereas this scenario is often melancholically regarded as the death of cinema, originality, reference, and so on, Steyerl regards it as a potential revolution in the class hierarchy of images, one in which previously inaccessible images—including nonconformist, political, and avant-garde material condemned to the relative obscurity of archives or underground collectives thanks to the neoliberal restructuring of media institutions—have been resurrected as compressed, mobile, poor-quality files that can be shared, reformatted, and reedited ad infinitum. Even though the values of speed, intensity, and range represented by the poor image are consistent with the logic of hi-tech capitalism, Steyerl argues that it fosters an alternative economy of social relations by forming unexpected “visual bonds” between dispersed individuals. She concludes that the surprising linkages of thought and affect enabled by the circulation of poor images realizes the goals of historical practices like the political documentary that attempted to instrumentalize an aesthetic of impoverishment for the purposes of social mobilization.

From Steyerl’s perspective, then, documentary sobriety appears as a presciently democratic and even radical discourse: a proletarian image-economy whose time has finally come. Indeed, her defense of the poor image is emblematic of the recursive, spiraling work of seriousness, which renews the political value of degraded forms even as its own cultural capital appears to erode in the process. But Trinh urges us to approach the political economy of sobriety from another direction, by considering not only the format but also the formal logic of the poor image. Documentary serves as a case in point, in that its differential distribution of aesthetic and political sensibilities is implicitly guided by humanitarian ethical considerations. The stripped down, functional, denotative aesthetic (or what Trinh simply terms “bad shots”), and the uncomplicated subjectivity reserved for the most serious subjects of documentary, evidences the remedial and even primitivist logic of this ethical paradigm, which claims an impoverished, limited, barren horizon of existence for the other in the name of a general equivalence, or “humanity.” We are thus able to witness with startling clarity the coercive dynamic of the anti-aesthetic ethic of sobriety, as it constitutes the division of society, as well as the division of the documentary form, into two classes—those who are perpetually cast in the role of “real life,” and those who decide on the aesthetic, and occupy the domain of “art.”

That real class-schisms are cemented by the performative work of documentary sobriety is plain to see in the distinct circulatory routes of contemporary sober documentaries and their aesthetically refined counterparts: whereas the latter enjoy an enduring career in the world’s most prestigious museums, galleries, festivals, and showcases, the former are disposable commodities whose limited shelf-life is restricted to the domain of the human rights (or fill in the blank color) film festival and the non-profit advocacy campaign. Through a critique such as Trinh’s, we therefore begin to glimpse a deeply entrenched and debilitating shadow economy of the poor image, whose embedded class-hierarchies nevertheless prop up Steyerl’s defense of sobriety and infuse it with its rejuvenating force. Whereas the makers and spectators of the serious documentary are routinely envisioned as humanitarian volunteers “giving up” the pleasures of aesthetic experience in order to confront the ethical kernel of humanity, such a critique reveals that the sacrifice that fuels and enables the political economy of sobriety is always that of the other.

The documentary logic of sobriety isolates a dynamic within seriousness that may well possess a more general significance. It shows that the continuing saga of sobriety’s apparent discursive liberation invariably detracts from its role in the production and maintenance of more obscure but nonetheless concrete forms of enclosure. Perhaps it is here that the central intrigue of seriousness,
as well as its enduring cultural fascination, abides: in its troubled relationship with what—or who—is ultimately excluded in this ongoing process of epistemological clarification.

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Notes


2 Ibid., 54.

3 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 19: “a minor literature…proceeds by dryness and sobriety, a willed poverty, pushing deterritorialization to such an extreme that nothing remains but intensities.”


For an elaboration of this idea in relation to the rhetorical structure of seriousness, see Hent de Vries, “Must We (NOT) Mean What We Say? Seriousness and Sincerity in the Work of J.L. Austin and Stanley Cavell,” in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, edited by Ernst von Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 90-118.


Ibid 44.